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MR. BUFFUM

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REALMS OF DAY
A SOLDIER OF LIFE
ONE LITTLE BOY
YOUNG 'UN
THE CRICKET MATCH
Etc., etc.

MR. BUFFUM

BY

HUGH DE SÉLINCOURT

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I	Mr. Buffum's Breakaway	9
II	Mr. Buffum Treads on It	24
III	Mr. Buffum Enters the Blue Train	37
IV	Mr. Buffum on the Blue Train	54
V	Mr. Buffum Visits the Casino at Monte Carlo	72
VI	Mr. Buffum Gives a Party	88
VII	Mr. Buffum Buys a New Car	109
VIII	Mr. Buffum has an Encounter with Hymen	125
IX	Mr. Buffum Decides to have no Nonsense	136
X	Mr. Buffum has his Eyes Opened	151
XI	Mr. Buffum Fails to Propose	174
XII	Mr. Buffum gets Put into his Place	194
XIII	Mr. Buffum Fails as a Buffer	212
XIV	Mr. Buffum Steadies the Buffs	237

TO

MR. & MRS. TED

WITH MY LOVE

April 1930

MR. BUFFUM

CHAPTER I

MR. BUFFUM'S BREAKAWAY

MR. BUFFUM at fifty decided to settle down comfortably. Lucia, his niece (come an Eton cropper, the only cropper she was likely to come), decided otherwise. Niece lured him to take his first steps along the primrose path.

She it was who had taught Mr. Buffum to dance; she it was who decreed that he should appear on a polished dancing floor and move to the strains of that band which up till now he had only heard by wireless in his drawing-room.

She drove him from Sussex in her sports car. They dined at Dorking at 6.45. Surrender for one night was the agreement—to be redelivered safe and sure as milk in the morning.

Towards the close of dinner Mr. Buffum ventured a remonstrance: "The drive, dear Lucia, has been fast but pleasant; also our little dinner here . . ."

"Less lip-work, Old Man," she was swift to interrupt. "Lap up your coffee. A compact is a compact. I've tickets for a show. We sup at the Savoy, and dance, don't forget it, dance."

"In my young days," he mildly began once more, but her "Shall we finish our talk on the road?" extinguished his mild beginning. He found himself swiftly packed by her side in the two-seater, a lighted

cigar placed deftly between his lips, like a baby's dummy. Between admiration at her go and terror at her going, he managed to inform her that in his young days they did not pack a month's entertainment into one evening. A joy ride *or* a dinner *or* a theatre *or* a supper OR a dance. He roared the *ors* in time to hoots of her klaxon at an impeding lorry. She may have heard; but the pats on his knee were not too reassuring, as she shouted in front of her: "You deserve a change."

They tore on through the darkness. Touched sixty on the by-pass. "These abominable cross-roads make you crawl."

Still breathless from the drive, with her arm snuggled in his in a taxi, Mr. Buffum stared in front of him as the driver dodged through the glaring streets. He had passed being nervous; it was no use: what was to be was to be. He was resigned to his fate, anticipating hopefully rest at the theatre. Too hopefully.

The play, niece-chosen, was not restful. The theatre was connected in Mr. Buffum's mind with prodigious scenic displays of Shakespeare, or mild sentimental comedies, or the earnest gloomy drama which represents Life. He took his pleasures seriously and a little thinly, and gave them and his business up without any fierce pang when he retired to the country after the War. He had never seen a slick crook play.

From the moment, very soon after the rise of the curtain, when a gentleman came noiselessly down the stairs, peered round the corner into the bar lounge, stealthily took a heavy brass candlestick from the chimney-piece, advanced silently to attack a man behind a newspaper, fought him, struck him down, was climbing out of the window, only to be shot by

the fellow on the ground, shamming stunned—Mr. Buffum listened with mouth ajar and watched with bulging eyes—" quite taken out of himself," as they say in his part of the country.

Blood dripped through the ceiling. The heroine was doped—he could have warned her in a loud voice against that bluff rogue of a landlady; the heroine's brother, strapped in a chair—oh, a gallant lad!—had a knife drawn across his bare white throat before his wounded father's eyes (Mr. Buffum could have screamed with horror), and yet they would not tell where the incriminating papers were hidden.

And the tick-tick-tick of the infernal machine placed in the clock made Mr. Buffum sweat with anxiety. What an ass, for all his charm, that young Secret Service man was to be taken in by the arch-scoundrel's assumption of heart failure when he had the whole game in his hands! And the comic entry of the honest, ridiculous barman to the rescue.

As the curtain fell Mr. Buffum protested to his niece, " Of course, my dear, that is not Art."

" It *got you* all right, Old Man. Now for the Savoy. Trip it swiftly but with care."

He had renounced argument; but in the taxi he was obliged to suggest, very gently, that perhaps his *début* should be made in slightly less grand and glorious surroundings.

" Not a word," his niece sternly replied. " Old Man, you're FOR it."

Thoughts of hurry for the last train to his suburban home, a twenty minutes' sleepy ride in a railway carriage, elder sister in the opposite corner, gaunt and upright and rather jerkily intense. A slow quarter of an hour's walk up a steepish hill to a dark house, a glass of milk and a biscuit . . . bed at 12.30—*very*

late . . . but the drama improved the mind. This sort of thing hadn't somehow occurred to him. Many things had not occurred to him. Modesty made him feel they were not quite in his line. For one thing, it never occurred to him that anyone could much like him. The face he saw every morning in the glass when he shaved did not strike him as prepossessing. For another, it had never occurred to him to order champagne—at a public dinner it circulated; but with his own lips actually to order a bottle—well, it had never occurred to him. He never pretended to be dashing.

The taxi had barely stopped before the door was opened by a magnificent official. Lucia tripped gaily in with the air of a Peri returning to Paradise. Mr. Buffum fumbled in suddenly shrunk pockets with a suddenly swollen hand for a half-crown, as Niece disappeared behind great swinging doors, leaving him alone. He ought to have told her that he had never been to the Savoy before, except once to lunch in the Grill Room, which was different. Still, a man of fifty, he boldly supposed, could walk in where other men walked. He should not have let the dear child assume he knew his way about. She was nowhere to be seen. No doubt it was unbelievable that a sane gentleman of fifty should not quite know what to do when supping at the Savoy. He looked round bashfully at countless ladies, old and young, sitting about, obviously not simply waiting for friends, but showing to everybody else (to himself in particular) how familiar they were with scenes of grandeur: so familiar, to judge by their manner, as almost to be bored. Men, young and old, strolled about at their complete ease. Every eye bored his shyness like a gimlet, and they all knew to a man, to a woman, to a boy, to a girl, that he,

poor old Buffum, had never taken supper after the theatre, let alone supper at the Savoy and DANCE.

Some kind young thing would be whispering brightly in his ear: "Best get home to your milk and biscuit, old dear. Time you were gone to bye-byes, don't you think?"

So he moved on, to be confronted by apparently hordes of knee-breeched lackeys in grey plush coats with epaulettes: august creatures, obviously placed there to warn off undesirable persons by haughty glances, and in no wise to welcome and assist any respectable but too shy visitor. Who was he, poor old Buffum, to venture into such grandeur? No wonder they eyed him with hostile disdain. He didn't even know whether he should remove his hat. He kept moving slowly forward. They might think he meant to get somewhere if he kept moving. Slowly one stair after another—then a level space—to more stairs. He must not move too fast or he would reach somewhere he did not want to be. Just—keep—moving—Niece would surely come and find him. No, not down those stairs into that vast, brilliantly lighted room. He halted, dazed, then a stroke of genius came to him and he turned slowly round and moved slowly back.

The epauletted flunkeys kept disdainful eyes upon him. Crowned heads incognito, earls, millionaires, magnates, ministers of the Crown, frequented this place: not simple souls like Buffum.

"Once more up and once more down," thought Mr. Buffum, "and then I think I must really give it up."

He was moving painfully back towards the brilliant lights when, on a flurry of quick steps behind, he turned to see Lucia, fresh as though she had taken a bath—and hear:

" Oh, forgive me, Old Man, for letting you wander. Thought you knew the place. This way, dear. Now then, Thomas," she addressed a knee-breeched flunkey, " what about showing the gentleman the cloak-room ? Just leave your things. You'll find me here."

The flunkey deigned to become a human being.

" This way, sir. You looked so perfectly at home, if you'll pardon my saying so. . . . From the Colonies, no doubt. If you should wish to wash your hands. Yes—the ticket, sir." Very flattering and very pleasant Mr. Buffum found his attentions. He began to feel almost human himself ; though, as he washed his face and brushed his hair, he could not help feeling a little muddled (such is the force of habit) and uncertain as to whether he were finishing one day or beginning the next. He had to collect his wits to withstand the temptation of undressing and going to bed somewhere, as he was accustomed to do at this hour of the day. He managed it successfully—did not even undo his tie, though his fingers wandered to its ends—and he gave the flunkey a well-earned shilling for his humanity as he was redelivered, washed and brushed up, to his waiting niece. He leaned over her to say with a sad little smile :

" I fear I'm what you call a dud at this, my dear."

" What foolishness ! " she cried, and, fondly taking his arm, she conjured him into the gorgeous banqueting-hall, in the centre of which shone dazzling the immense dance floor.

While she urged and guided him among innumerable tables, he pondered as to whether she really supposed he was going to trust his length and shyness to that polished surface. Merely to sit in that gorgeous room at such an hour and to eat would try his small stock

of *savoir vivre* to the uttermost. To dance! He gave a wan smile.

"I like to be well in it. Right by the band."

After interminable progress among tables and suppers, just as he was mastering his step, so to speak, and was ready to go on indefinitely, he found a bowing waiter holding back a chair, and seated himself—as the band struck up, not a derisive salute at his at last winning through to a seat at a supper-table, but a simple popular fox-trot.

"You order," he sighed, waving away the enormous menu. He listened to a never-ending list of edibles strung off without hesitation, while he watched, awed and fascinated, the floor fill with couples. His arm was squeezed.

"Isn't this fun, now? Isn't this jolly?"

He looked into bright eyes—and nodded the lie he could not utter.

"Horrid people, mostly. But a perfect supper, a perfect band, a perfect floor. Oh, what fun to have you here at last!"

With amazing swiftness she chose the wine from the head-waiter.

"Just wait till we warm up to it a bit, and then . . ."

She squeezed his arm again.

Would it be kinder to tell her at once or a little later that in no circumstances whatever could he be induced to move about on that treacherous polished surface, both for her sake and for his own? He could not take his eyes off its gleam. It had the same effect upon his mind as has a heaving sea upon the mind of a bad sailor, with a crossing in prospect. Crossing the Channel is a painful necessity. Dancing is a pleasure—a pleasure!—he smiled a ghostly smile at the grim humour of it. He felt too stiff somehow

in the throat to swallow much. Cold soup, ah! He drank it down, then wondered, should he have used a spoon? No. Lucia was sipping.

"Ah, the bubbly!" she cried, watching the glasses filled. "A toast! Here's to our first dance on a decent floor!"

Little light stuff—cool and refreshing—he tipped his hastily down.

"Good man! Good man!" She tapped his arm and filled his glass again, which he hastily emptied—she liked him to drink; in that way, at least, he could give her pleasure—to find courage to break to her the entire impossibility of venturing on that slippery, treacherous shininess even to please her—at his age and with his upbringing. "Oh, here they are!" she cried. "George and his sister!"

Mr. Buffum, to his amazement, saw a youngish man and a youngish woman who, though not appearing actually shy, yet moved with a certain diffidence of manner, suggesting that they had not lived and moved and had their being since infancy at the Savoy.

He instantly liked them in consequence, and was pleased that they sat at the next table, listening soon without arrogance to the sister's confession that it was good at last to meet him, after hearing so much of him from Lucia; so anxious to dance with him, too: a natural sense of rhythm, she'd heard; enjoying it, too, more than any boy.

That penetrated the rosy mist that rises from harassed nerves, champagne-drenched.

"Who? Me?" he gasped. "Dance?"

"You don't suppose," Lucia interposed, beaming, "I'd ask you out only to dance with me! Too poor fun! Enlaced with a mere relation!"

Oh, he was *for it*: indubitably *for it*!

He looked wildly round, contemplating flight, but he was too hemmed in; moreover, the knee-breeched flunkeys would collar him and lead him back, even if he escaped from the army of waiters, which was unlikely, aided as they would be by all the smart athletic young men, who owned the place, judging by their smiling air of proprietorship.

Mr. Buffum emptied the bottle into his glass, and the glass down his throat, remembering too late that wine-induced unsteadiness would not assist his steps on that treacherous surface, shining with a mighty goblin grin before him.

"I am so looking forward to dancing with you," he heard breathed into his right ear, horrified. He could only scratch that right ear in response; less expressive than a donkey's twitch of an ear. His state of mind was so agonizing that he found relief in knowing that it was utter nonsense to suppose that any minute a magic button might be pressed and his clothes be removed, leaving him bare as in a bad dream in the ball-room. That humiliation, at least, he would be spared.

And George was moving back his chair: horror on horror. Mr. Buffum plunged, to be saved from the fate of dancing first with a stranger on the shining treachery. He snatched his niece's hand.

"Come, my dear! Come! On your head be it!"

Only she would not fall on her head, poor darling, he incongruously thought.

Major H. O. D. Seagrave's chief fear, he told us one Sunday, as he stepped into the thousand h.p. Sunbeam on Daytona Beach, was of being ridiculous; every paper throughout the countries of the world had heralded the run as though it were accomplished:

now he might simply smash—ignominiously. So Mr. Buffum, in his second's walk from the table, he might just fall over. It was a supreme moment. He nerved himself to catch the enfolding supporting rhythm; his innermost being breathed a prayer for help, as he took hold of his partner, and then he caught the rhythm and they marched off. . . . The Atlantic liner was launched: the liner floated. But the liner, she's a lady: and Mr. Buffum was a modest, almost too modest, gentleman.

What was this? He could hardly believe his feet. He was moving like a ship over a calm sea, the music a favouring breeze in the sails. Smoothly, easily, effortlessly, he glided on, a slow smile widening on his broad and happy face.

"Pack up all your cares and woe. . . . Off we go. . . . Bye-bye, Blackbird. . . ."

And he had formerly enjoyed scuffling along, carpet rugs rolled back on dull boards, to the tune of a mere machine.

"Oh, I say," he whispered to his partner in a trance; and later, on the same ecstatic note, "I *do* love it."

On and on they moved. Bumping into others! Ridiculous. Feet shooting out! Absurd. Stop and sway gently to the captivating rhythm, then smoothly forward along the clear space ahead.

"Bye-bye, Blackbird." No eccentric trickery of hip- or foot-work for him. Let those who will Charleston. Let those who will Black Bottom. Leave such fidgety antics for the nimble or the blasé. Enough to move rhythmically on and on, the old fox suavely trotting in the mutual infection of the measure.

"You dance like an angel," he whispered.

"Marion dances like an angel's whisker!" she replied, laughing, thrilled by his enormous enjoyment.

"It doesn't stop at twelve, does it?" he asked on a stab of consternation.

"Not till two!"

His clasp on her tightened. "Oh, good," he joyously sighed. He noticed a tallish thin man with a rather nice face, about his own age, dancing in a kind of side hall. Something familiar about him—danced unmistakably well, without mannerism; he turned and, revolving, looked again—to find the side hall was a mirror—he had caught a glimpse of Mr. Augustus Buffum with a stranger's eye for the first time in his life. Jubilation such as he had never known sang within his modest bosom. He could almost have said that the fellow in the mirror looked distinguished.

The dance ended. Seated at the table again, Mr. Buffum beckoned kindly but firmly to the wine waiter and ordered another bottle of champagne without a qualm. The moment the band struck up another fox-trot, he politely and at once engaged Miss Marion, gallantly restraining his wish to cry out: "Hurry up! Now hurry up! Don't for any's sake waste time, muddling and chatting and loitering."

He was impatient to be off. He was *for* it. Oh, he was *for* it! And Miss Marion would not or could not hurry—must remove a lace scarf which was entangled in something; must make unnecessary remarks to Lucia—(Dear me! Dear me! Come on!). He could not truthfully say she was loitering, but oh, so slow to his boyish impatience.

Ah, at last . . .

Niece was right—Miss Marion danced like an angel's—what was her horrid cocktail joke? And Niece

was right again: though exaggerated in her statement—the modern way of putting things—"enlaced with a mere relation."

"How many times," the band broke into a sudden burst of indiscreet song, asking with charming American candour:

> "How many times has a certain feeling
> Troubled you so that you hit the ceiling?"

"Well," Mr. Buffum blandly smiled to himself, "troubled is hardly the word I should choose." And he pretended not to hear these cogent questions, enunciated with an almost ferocious clarity:

> "I'd feel bad if you kissed too many;
> But I'd feel worse if you'd not kissed any."

"I wonder, would you? Because I've not, you know," his thought brooded cheerfully, as he moved along with Miss Marion in a swoon of delight, smiling through a rosy haze at Lucia dancing near with George.

Two hundred and fifty pounds saved every year! Why so much? Say ten pounds every month for one such evening: £120 from £250 left £130. The calculations did themselves in his happy head. Dinner and dance all the evening. Vistas opened, as he glided and revolved in a serenely voluptuous dream. Something deliciously never-ending about this ease of movement, wafted along together by the music's compelling beat. Miss Marion was enjoying it too, exquisitely docile to his lead, firm and light on her feet.

"If I were a youngster!" he thought. "My goodness!" And added in dreamy exaltation, "I doubt if I could love dancing with her more!" And in defiance of modesty, "Or if anybody could!"

He hoped that no more horrid disturbing questions would be chanted in his ear. Some things were better left floating softly in the air than thundered in blank words.

"But I'll not miss quite so much in future," he smiled to assure himself, and he observed to his partner:

"I enjoy things in my own retiring quiet way, you know."

His shoulder was perceptibly pressed as her answer came with quiet emphasis:

"I should say you do!"

Mr. Buffum began to blossom. Radiant plans flitted gaily through his mind. Many things occurred to him, the least and most explicit of which was the resolve that he would learn to waltz by next month—for he found himself walking sadly back to his seat to the strains of an alluring waltz, the new manner of dancing which he had not yet mastered.

Niece was winning at a canter. Only one more dance he had with her, and not wholly for her sake that she might not be enlaced with a mere relation but might dance with George. Never before in his life had he felt at such happy, care-free ease with a girl—felt simply how dear a girl was and nice and different. Movement with her was cumulative delight. Everything in him sang with happiness. The hours of the evening sped. All too soon the end came; and Lucia, anxious, of course, to wish George good night, was saying:

"Two taxis: you take Marion. We'll drop them and I'll go on with you to the garage."

How it happened Mr. Buffum never knew. It had never occurred to him that such a thing *could* happen. But he found his arm was somehow enclosing her in the taxi, and he heard his voice saying:

" My dear, I've never enjoyed an evening so much in all my life." And she nestled up to him and said, " I *am* so glad," and then, to his delight and to his astonishment, he found that he was, with all the naturalness and simplicity in the world, giving her a kiss. And she kissed him and said—there was no mistaking the words—" You are a darling ! " The words entirely took Mr. Buffum's breath away. A darling ! She meant it. It had never occurred to him. He sat in rapturous silence till Marion left and he was joined by Niece, who took command.

Back in the sports car—racing through the empty lighted streets of the town, out into the dark country, behind their own raying stream of light—faster and ever faster—the pace lulled the rosy dream of the evening. What an evening !

Suddenly Mr. Buffum felt he must make confession.

" Lucia," he shouted, looking at the intent, stern face of the driver, " if ever my name should be mentioned between you and that dear young lady, I should like you to assure her that my intentions . . . " The sudden slowing of the car stopped him : the words were taken from him. The car was nearly brought to a standstill that no emphasis might be lost in what she said :

" Don't worry your dear old mind about intentions, honourable or dishonourable. Marion's a brick. Not out to hook a husband. Not a bit. She loved it. Simply loved it. Thinks you a perfect lamb. So do I. Just enjoy it as you've made us all enjoy it and leave it at that ! Cut out those frousty notions. . . . Enjoy it. Leave it at that."

" I've not left it at that ! " he blurted out like a naughty boy.

" What do you mean ? "

"I've arranged, subject to your convenience, another. Only, I thought, dinner next time—more time for dancing."

"Oh," she cried, "you are priceless!" And treading on the gas, shoe hard down on the floorboard, she shot the car off into the night.

CHAPTER II

MR. BUFFUM TREADS ON IT

MR. BUFFUM'S mind ran on its own lines, which were extremely well worn. When he retired into the country men he met supposed he'd buy a car now, and Mr. Buffum affably supposed he would, mainly to avoid argument. Knowing he wouldn't. A car meant a chauffeur; a chauffeur meant another cottage: a wife, possibly children; "Any orders for John to-day?" "Thank you, I'd rather go for a quiet walk." More eyes to watch him: more brains to wonder what he did with himself: more people to fall out with each other.

It never occurred to him that he could possibly drive a car himself: any more than in watching his beloved birds fly in the garden it had ever occurred to him that he could spread his arms out and move through the air from tree to tree, singing.

He liked his quiet, orderly life: he liked it very much: pottering in the garden, walking about the lanes, noticing the continual slight changes everywhere as the year progressed; the variety of colour of earth and sky on various days—"never quite the same, you know," he would mildly smile.

Niece Lucia's boisterous entry into his life did not disturb it, but quickened his faculty of appreciation. In his quiet diffident way he grew steadily fonder and fonder of her. He was aware of consideration for him as a human being, and quietly rejoiced in the aware-

ness. He was more used to hostile criticism of look and speech than to acceptance and affection.

" You just come," he used to say, " when you like. You just come." He said it with unwonted emphasis.

And Niece Lucia just came.

She came at 9.15 one Saturday morning in May in what Mr. Buffum, meeting her on the drive, was clever enough to recognize as a strange two-seater, heavier, dingier and older than her nippy red-winged Sports. There was nothing dingy or heavy, however, about its occupant. Dancing mischief bubbled from toe to twinkling eye as she embraced Mr. Buffum rapturously, saying :

" Here she is at last ! Magnificent ! "

Mr. Buffum wondered what she could be up to now : the whiff of mischief was in the air. He waited for the news to break.

" I left at six-thirty. Jolly good, considering ! My goodness ! What fun ! "

Why had she left at six-thirty ? She was so full of something to tell—simply oozing mystery and delight —that he'd only to wait to have it. And it was mischief, mischief for certain. He knew the signs too well, and waited.

" Do you think I might possibly have all you've got to eat in the house put out on the dining-room table and consume it for breakfast ? Too thrilling ! Planning it for weeks . . . and here we are ! I'm starving. I'll take my little bag into the bathroom and have a bath while kind Eliza cooks all she can lay hands on."

" Kind Eliza will be glad to," said Mr. Buffum truthfully and happily, not sorry for a brief respite from what he knew to be the great surprise.

" I expect the dear girl's engaged to be married ! "

he thought brightly for her sake, stifling the sigh from his own dislike of change, however much for the better her marriage must certainly be, she was so extraordinarily delightful exactly as she was.

Thus he ruminated on the drive, watching her swing along, watching her disappear with a jump into the house, listening to sudden laughter from the kitchen —people *did* laugh near Lucia.

He turned to see a small boy, the gardener's son Monnie (short for Monarch), a friend of his, staring engrossed at the car, drawn from nowhere by its magic presence.

"Fancy Miss Lucia in this 'ere! Lumme!" he chuckled as he noticed Mr. Buffum looking at him, and was not at all abashed under the eye of him who was called the Governor. Mr. Buffum's remarkable, almost unnatural, diffidence kept him from handing out advice from his fifty years' store of experience in life to those with fewer years. He blamed himself for this, as for a shirked responsibility, excusing himself on the plea that he really didn't know enough to advise others. So in the boy's mind Mr. Buffum loomed as a funny mixture of ally and saint: and Mr. Buffum used to say, "Oh! we get along very nicely on the whole."

Now he walked nearer the car. He liked to share another's keenness, though the object on which that keenness was lavished might be beyond his power to appreciate. Monnie's keenness was as wholehearted as his own, though a little differently directed.

He gently prodded the silently staring boy with, "It seems a very nice sort of car."

"Just right for you and me, Governor. Solid. No kicks and tricks. Roll you along safe as mother pushing baby in a pram. And get there, too. Mind *you*.

Quicker nor that old bike of yourn. That easy, too."

Mr. Buffum smiled.

" I could never drive a motor-car, Monnie."

He spoke gently as one who states an imperishable fact.

" Aw. Don't talk so silly ! " begged the boy, who perfectly understood Mr. Buffum's shyness of approach, as it resembled his own to certain subjects. " 'Ere. Come on. You set aside me. I'll show yer."

Mr. Buffum was always a victim to the spell of another's enthusiasm. It gently tickled him with pleasure to be taken in hand and mothered by the small boy. Tight fingers gripped his coat sleeve, pulling.

" He really does want me in with him," he thought as he climbed in, " also itching to handle the magic thing and show off perhaps." Mr. Buffum watched the light come into the boy's face—where the light came from in a human being interested him far more than what the boy was saying—which his hearing quietly refused to convey to his brain—or whatever part of him turned words from ordered noise to something with meaning. Self-starter—gears—accelerator —throttle—clutch—all the queer jargon passed happily by while he watched this young human creature lighted up and almost trembling with passion to pass on information which should be useful to them both. Wherever had he learned it all ?

" Now once more. See, you're in neutral. Press the self-starter." And Monnie pressed it firmly, so that the engine started and Mr. Buffum came to himself with a jump to expostulate :

" I say, Monnie, really. Miss Lucia—you know——"

" Push the clutch well out—this pedal, see : then

get into bottom : then let off the brake, slowly let in the clutch, give her a leetle more gas, and off she moves."

And off they slowly moved for ten yards along the drive.

" Yes, but, Monnie——" faltered Mr. Buffum.

" Then down with the clutch," the boy persisted, deaf with excitement, " on with the brake and you stop and get into neutral and then into reverse and slowly back—see. Never a jerk—always slow and sure—feel your way sort of with feet and hands—you just want to get your nerve, like. Lumme, you and me, quiet-like up and down here."

They stopped again. The boy's face was glowing with excitement. Mr. Buffum enjoyed the sight of it as much as the sight of a prized gentian flowering.

" Here. Feel yer power over it—yerself," this passionate missionary of his gospel urged, seizing Mr. Buffum's hand. " Look. Press that down. Switch 'er off !—yerself ! "

Mr. Buffum pressed. There was a click. A thrilling silence and stillness as the engine stopped. Mr. Buffum tingled and coloured under the boy's gleaming stare.

" Feel it ? Eh ? What ! "

There certainly was something rather—well—surprising. It was the first time Mr. Buffum's hand had ever controlled machinery.

" And that's abso-bloomin-lutely nothing to when you first feel her start."

" I can quite believe it," Mr. Buffum agreed, preparing to get out.

But his arm was clutched. " You set 'ere : you just set 'ere." The boy was squeezing in front of him : and almost against his better nature Mr. Buffum

found himself where he had never before dreamed of sitting—in the driver's seat.

The infection of Monnie's excitement tingled through him like an electric current.

" Oh, I say, you know, we oughtn't——" he stammered, like one little culprit to another.

" Clutch—see—push it well down—disconnects engine part and wheel part—gear in bottom—firmly—so —other foot on that little pedal—press it gently as you let in the clutch—that's lifting the left foot—there now we should be off. Now down with the clutch pedal again—into neutral . . ."

Mr. Buffum tried to shake off the electric intensity of the boy's frantic enthusiasm by his usual method of observing its effect upon the boy's face and bearing. But the actual touch and manipulation of the magic toy's wonderful appliances distracted and thrilled him. His usual command was in abeyance. Something was beginning to move—down a hill—and when his hand was seized and pressed against the self-starter—that something was fairly off—down a hill, too, that was no mere gradual slope. He was in the driver's seat, and the engine was purring away: his body tingling with its slight perpetual throb. He could no longer expostulate or resist.

" Down with the clutch—good—now into bottom—now gently on the accelerator—right foot."

The engine roared at his touch. Mr. Buffum's eyes blazed with excitement, he trembled all over his body, tense and thrilling, nearly shouting . . .

" Not too much—now gently up with the left foot—gently down with the right.

" And she moves! Lumme! She moves."

Mr. Buffum was too excited to hear the shout of the ecstatic boy as the car moved away under his

guidance. Monnie's excitement was a childish thing compared with Mr. Buffum's fifty-years-old thrill at thus being for the first time in touch with what to him was sheer magic.

The amazing thing was indubitably moving.

In sheer blind excitement he leaned ecstatically forward, pressing the accelerator on the floor-board. The car roared forward—every nerve in Mr. Buffum's body sang in mad glee, like a taut bow-string thrummed—nothing mattered at all in his drunken fury.

Straight bang off the gravel drive on to the grass into a tall, slim may tree—his right knee was hit by a shouting boy—sudden stillness—the engine stopped and the car——

"Good Heavens!" said Mr. Buffum devoutly. "Where's the may tree? It was a red one."

"Here—let me back out of this—'fore anyone sees us."

But it was too late.

Lucia had come out. She was furious. She saw her whole plan frustrated. Her uncle's face showed the shock he must be feeling.

"You utter little idiot!" she said to Monnie, quite beside herself. "You've spoilt the whole thing. How dare you meddle?"

He was climbing miserably out of the car. She put an angry hand on his shoulder and shook him.

"Put him off it now for ever, you little idiot!"

Mr. Buffum came round to observe a small boy moving off, crumpled and dejected, a woebegone figure, fists rubbing eyes.

"It was my fault, Lucia," he said.

"Come in to breakfast and let the little meddling ass go home. I'd planned it all so carefully, too. Why are you so soft with that little idiot! Enough

to terrify anyone. May as well back her out. Lucky you're not killed—and the car smashed—and your favourite may tree. Oh, I could *beat* him ! . . ."

Mr. Buffum got guiltily out and inspected, when the car reversed on to the drive, the may tree. He announced cheerfully to mollify her : " It was only bent, dear : not damaged. I am so very sorry. It was really my fault, you know. I somehow got led astray by Monnie. I shouldn't have been. But I was so interested watching his face that I forgot what we were doing."

" I'll wash his face for him, the meddlesome little brat ! You must be shaken to pieces."

Mr. Buffum was torn in two : he wanted to conciliate the angry, disappointed Lucia, and he wanted to make his fellow-culprit, a drooping figure pricked out in the distance by the straight tree-trunk against which he crouched to hide, straighten up again like the bent hawthorn, which was his red one. He disliked angry disappointment : he disliked, more, tears in a keen small boy—a shilling might help the one—her breakfast the other. So he took Lucia's hand, and, patting it, suggested that he would join her shortly in the dining-room, as really that small boy must not remain bent like that. " When it was mostly my fault."

He brightened on the way to the boy to notice the shilling he pulled out of his trouser pocket was a new one. A new shilling was surely a panacea for small boys' troubles.

But the shilling, for all its newness, and the kindly diffidence of its offering, was bluntly, rudely, sobbily rejected.

" Don't want no shilling ! "

It actually seemed to make the trouble worse.

Through fists and sobs and sniffs, Mr. Buffum made out :

" Put-yer-orf-it. Meant-it-for-ours-and-all-and-now-it's-never-to-be."

But he was too upset to be able to give the words any definite meaning : and too intent on soothing the boy's unhappiness to mind not understanding :

" Oh no, I'm sure she didn't mean it. We might have smashed her car, you know. We oughtn't to have meddled with it. But no damage is done. It's all right."

He found himself suddenly confronted not by the crumpled weeping boy but by the alert imp of keenness whose tear-stained cheeks were curious relics of a long-gone woe—and the keenness seemed to have gained in tensity as he said :

" You will have another go then, Governor ? "

" Never. Never without permission ! "

" Permission ! " The startling imp yelled. And he ran off waving his arms, not so much to get somewhere as to work off something.

Mr. Buffum was too engrossed by the sudden completeness of the boy's change of mood to trouble his mind about its cause. He walked into the house to face angry disappointment—softened, he hoped with a smile, by coffee and rashers and toast.

There was the news, too, that the dear child wanted to break to him. It was foolish of course, to put off the moment of hearing the change. It was sweet of her to want to tell him. Selfish, of course, really to want her to remain exactly as she was, though very natural—very natural.

He began by telling her of Monnie's sudden leap from misery to joy and the effect the word " permission " seemed to produce.

"Of course *he* couldn't ask you to let us have another go—I think his words were—but that's where extreme age scores. I can. He would so love it. Really his passion for those things is extraordinary."

He went quietly on, and to his amazement the sullenness on Niece Lucia's face gave way to a look of amused delight which seemed to spread and deepen. Almost as if, were she a small boy, she too would have rushed off, waving her arms.

"Yes: I think . . . I think perhaps you might," she said as though it were difficult to speak.

"I was sure you couldn't remain so very angry with him!"

"Oh, I'm not so sure of that!" she said, and proceeded to hug Mr. Buffum, a proceeding he always found most satisfactory and for which he could never find an adequate reason. In this instance, however, it was quite explicable: the sort of overflow which would herald, as it were, from a dear impulsive girl the news he now leaned back to hear, and helped to educe by saying with a smile in a voice of sympathy:

"Now then, you tell me, dear . . ."

Mr. Buffum blinked, to find a bright surprised eye scrutinizing him, and to hear her at last bring out: "You are the dearest most unsuspecting lamb!"

He was baffled to know what another sort of lamb might be supposed to suspect, but he did not worry about it: the main thing was that Niece was no longer angry or disappointed. So he quietly remarked:

"I don't know why, but I thought you were going to announce your engagement to me."

"Oh yes! Of course, there's nothing else could really gladden a nice girl's heart, is there?"

Mr. Buffum rose, much relieved, but scenting argu-

ment on lines which would all too swiftly lead him far out of his elderly, old-fashioned depth. About to suggest a stroll round the garden, he was interrupted:

"Look here! I've an article to finish. Will you take me for a walk in the woods about twelve, before lunch?"

He smiled agreement: she rose and, brushing crumbs from her skirt, she very casually went on: "You might perhaps cheer poor Monnie up a bit. He can't do that old bus any harm if you're there. I'm awfully sorry I snapped his head off."

"You are a very dear girl!" said Mr. Buffum, delighting in every sign of Eton-cropped, cigarette-smoking, very modern Niece's thought for others. Nothing mattered compared with this quite fundamental kindliness; that he could perfectly understand: much, he owned, he could not understand, as for instance at that very moment why she should seem to be so deeply amused.

"She's playing some trick on me!" he thought to himself. "She's playing some trick on me!" and couldn't for the life of him think what the trick could be as he went out happily to call Monnie, who again appeared from nowhere directly Mr. Buffum's foot touched the gravel of the drive by the car.

The car seemed to emit a strange fascination in which Mr. Buffum was caught before he was aware of it, directly he stepped within a certain radius. A sort of trembly excitement came over him. He was immediately clay in the hands of Monnie, who did not even deign to answer his stammered plea, "Oh, not me! Drive, Monnie. Not me!"

And there he was once more in the driver's seat, listening to tensely spoken words of instruction,

thrilling to the throb of the started engine—but this time with a growing sense of what control of this marvellous toy meant.

Mr. Buffum became lost to everything: his mind was riveted to words which gained meaning and on instruments and appliances which responded to his touch of foot and hand. He was in a new world, moving slowly down the drive; backing jerkily up the drive, then at last almost smoothly: forward down the drive—stop—backward up the drive, and a sense of control over the wonder-thing grew within him, of a new confidence in himself as he obeyed Monnie's injunctions to stop, and heard—oh, joy!—Monnie's occasional, so sincere, words of praise, as when he got without a sound into second.

He came to himself at last sufficiently to gasp:

"I say, are you sure we're doing Miss Lucia's car no harm?" To which Monnie sternly replied:

"Did she or didn't she say we might? And look there!"

He turned to see Niece's beaming face through the hedge. She came forward with sudden demureness.

The two sat guiltily under the owner's eye.

"It's lunch-time," she said. "I went my walk alone."

"Lunch-time! My dear! I *am* sorry."

Monnie stopped the engine and got out, followed by a repentant, apologetic culprit, who still shook with excitement, flushed.

"I had no idea!"

Monnie looked sullen but unrepentant. Such a morning was worth a lot in his young mind. Good enough, he thought so obstinately that he was less able to take in the next astounding words than he would otherwise have been.

"I'd *so* set my heart on you driving a car. I got it for a mere song. It's a present from me."

Nor could Mr. Buffum. Like Monnie, he stupidly gaped, the pair of them speechless.

"I don't quite understand," said Mr. Buffum feebly.

Monnie recovered more quickly.

"It's ours, Governor. Ours." He shouted and thumped the arm of Mr. Buffum hard, as though to beat the intelligence into him.

"But people don't—girls, I mean shouldn't . . ." Mr. Buffum stammered. "And I could never really drive a car, you know," he added parrot-like, from force of long habit.

"Don't talk so silly!" the boy shouted and thumped. "You can blinkin' well drive one now!"

"Well . . . of course, I don't know . . . I never heard of such a . . . So this was it? The mischief . . . really . . . I suppose . . .?"

"Lunch is on the table, sir," called the clear, kind voice of Eliza.

And that was how Mr. Buffum was lured into motoring by Niece Lucia, helped by luck and Monnie, the car-bitten young maniac.

CHAPTER III

MR. BUFFUM ENTERS THE BLUE TRAIN

MR. BUFFUM had on one reckless occasion travelled by a first-class Pullman to Brighton. Long afterwards he looked down sideways and picked a thread off his trousers when he thought of that affluent journey. It was not the spending of so much money which embarrassed him, but something else; he seemed out of place in luxurious surroundings, they were not the right setting somehow for his modest drabness.

Yet here he was at Victoria Station one dark, wet morning in January, sitting in a specially reserved seat of the Continental Express in which was said to be travelling José Marina, most erratic and most adored of film stars, and his destination was Cap d'Ail, near Monte Carlo, which seemed incredible to Mr. Buffum, but was nevertheless the fact. And no Niece Lucia to help him. Niece Lucia awaiting him at the other end, so far away, among rich strangers. Madness!

Opposite to him sat an English gentleman who behaved with the bored ease of a man in his dressing-room, as he removed outer clothing and ensconced himself in his arm-chair. Moreover he eyed Mr. Buffum with the kindly scrutiny which an old habitué of an exclusive club directs upon a member whom he has not the pleasure of knowing by sight.

Upon the table to his left a lolling South American woman—too rich, too dark and too beautiful—was

depositing from a big hand-bag untidy wads of notes, and handfuls of loose silver.

Mr. Buffum was thrilled to observe his table companion cast a cold blue eye upon her over his yet unfolded *Times*.

The train started. The train would not stop until Dover, when Mr. Buffum would be called upon to embark upon a ship—find a place thereon—and discover whether or not he was a good sailor. Never to have crossed the Channel before seemed more than a disgrace ; it seemed almost a crime at his age : the thought of being sick in public made him feel a shy child of five or six years old : it was improper somehow—to be doing anything so rudimentary at his age for the first time : almost like going to school.

" You just stream along in the crowd, dear : there's no difficulty whatever. If you feel groggy, sit on deck," Niece had reassured him : and while she spoke he had felt reassured. Not so now.

Besides, the real journey could not be said to begin until he entered the Blue Train on the seventeen-hour run through France. And to be publicly sick was not a good preliminary to the great adventure of spending the day and sleeping the night, of eating and living generally on a Blue Train speeding through a foreign country.

An infinity of intimate details occurred to his harassed mind, which even if he had thought of before, he could never have mentioned to Niece Lucia, modern as she was. An elderly gentleman of nice mind and decent upbringing should have left behind such difficulties at his private school.

" Lord Almighty ! That Marina woman ! We shall be held up by her pranks then." The perfect gentleman opposite dashed his *Times*, unused to such harsh

treatment, on the table, startling Mr. Buffum from his thoughts.

Was a rejoinder expected to this cryptic outburst? No one could be less marine than he himself was conscious of feeling.

"Ah! Oh! Yes!" he stammered, and looked vacant, to evade the impersonal stare of his suddenly incensed neighbour who relapsed into fiercer silence in which Mr. Buffum gratefully left him, and refreshed his memory once more by a glance at his shirt cuff, on which he had carefully noted the number of his coach on the Blue Train and of his compartment in the coach.

The cold rain beat against the window. The cold wind blew. He saw trees swaying. The sea would be horribly unquiet.

He decided that a wise man kept strictly within the known circle of his acquired habits; a hen did not suddenly start to swim, or a mole to caper over the surface of the ground, or a rabbit to stroll down the road on two legs. How then had a man of his years and habits been foolish enough to start travelling. . . .

"Oh it's such fun!" he heard in bitterness Niece Lucia's voice declare. He shook his head firmly, while the train bore him at relentless speed, inexorably farther from the known orbit of his small world.

"Luncheon, sir?" an attendant inquired.

"Oh no! thank you," Mr. Buffum hastily rejoined.

He watched in amazement people nonchalantly leaving their seats and moving along towards the restaurant car; whispering some of them "José, never!" . . . "I wonder where she is" . . . "latest vanishing trick" . . . and marvelling how their minds could find room for attention to any other matter than that of somehow reaching their destination, he turned his own attention to solving the problem whether to

put on his heavy coat over the light overcoat he was wearing, or to strip the light overcoat and bear it on his arm. Anyhow he decided not to wear his gloves on the way to the boat, as he must have tickets and passport pinched firmly in bare free fingers.

Thus three-quarters of an hour before the train reached Dover he was ready to descend : so he seemed to spend long hours watching the cold rain beat against the window, the cold wind blow with a violence that did not decrease as the train approached the coast.

* * * * *

The one idea on which Mr. Buffum's mind and heart were set, as he struggled after his porter into the new nautical world, was to find some quiet spot on board where he could not be seen by strange eyes—so that whatever was to happen might be allowed to happen in comparative peace and privacy. But that bright hope soon receded, as he found himself in a pandemonium of shouting staggering porters, excited women, intent crowding men, scared staring children, waiting in a queue to have his passport examined by a stern official in a small cabin. He was separated even from his porter and his things, who had cheerfully ascended what Mr. Buffum took to be a companion ladder, shouting genial instructions which Mr. Buffum had failed to understand. His passport examined, Mr. Buffum ascended the narrow steep stairway and emerged on deck, relieved to see his gesticulating porter : an impassive sailor grunted " Shair ? "

And Mr. Buffum shouted : " Oui " amazed at his command of the French language, the first word he had ever uttered to a native in his own strange tongue.

As Mr. Buffum settled himself in the chair, the impassive French sailor leaned over him and spoke volubly, with violent gesticulations—finishing abruptly

with " Ah you not understand ! " an impeachment Mr. Buffum could only answer with a faint smile.

He gazed sadly at the cold angry green sea, felt the fine cold rain on his face (the sailor had merely informed him that when the boat started he would be on its most sheltered side), and wondered what was going to happen. He would be in comparative quiet anyhow —no one would surely choose to sit in the rain.

He closed his eyes and waited.

But people kept coming up—rushing about—talking in wild excitement—chairs were placed behind him, beside him . . . a girl was almost laid at his feet—rolled in a rug on two chairs—between her father and mother—and still more people crowded up, growing more excited and talking more wildly—and even at this crucial moment they could speak of this José and the prank of her non-appearance. A thick mizzle of rain blew coldly in upon him. It seemed more than likely that he would be sopping wet even before the boat left the landing-stage. He thought he had learned by the time the engines started the true length of half an hour.

Even when the passengers had at last settled down, there seemed an interminable throbbing wait, accompanied by much shouting. Perhaps they were winding the thing up : perhaps the wretched thing wouldn't go. Mr. Buffum had possessed a car long enough to know how easily machinery went wrong : that there was no matter of course about its going, as the ignorant blandly assume : unless you remembered to turn the little tap for the petrol, no power in heaven or upon earth could coax the car into the village. There must be innumerable things to go wrong in a complicated mass of machinery needed to drive this cumbrous edifice through miles of angry water.

At length a deafening hoot pierced Mr. Buffum's wet ear. A man fumbled in the intricacies of layers of clothing, produced a watch and remarked quietly: "We shall be five minutes late in starting." His companion went through an equally painful and protracted process, eyed his watch judicially and remarked: "Six or seven at least!" And while they put their watches painfully back, a stranger shot out his arm, looked at his wrist watch and scowled.

Pacers on the deck, by the forthright manner they walked and talked, might have been taking a constitutional on a country road: which made it ludicrous to see them pass and repass with such frequency: you might have thought they found actual pleasure in displaying their determined physical energy to those who were prepared for miserable physical distress; but the deck was the chosen place of athletic persons who liked to brave the elements, and of weak persons who risked exposure to rain and wind and sea from fear of worse discomfort.

"We're off" the pacers at length declared; and someone added: "And there's been no sign of her, because I asked the second mate."

And Mr. Buffum, whose feet they had often brushed in passing thought: "And now perhaps you'll kindly sit down somewhere."

Not so. Their fun was just beginning, as the boat began to answer to the movement of the waves: for they were anxious apparently, as they picked their way by the rows of sad sitters on the deck, to acquire a seaman's balance: a laudable ambition, no doubt, but Mr. Buffum, on whom they stumbled with laughing apologies, was inclined to think the ambition both mistimed and misplaced.

The wind brought him loud and cheerful comments : " So devilish inconsiderate to sit on the promenade deck." . . . " José's given 'em the slip ! How like her ! " " This tossing'll turn 'em green all right " . . . " Oh I beg your pardon " . . . as a roll of the vessel sent one pacer falling on an elderly lady, whose head was wrapped in a scarf.

A wisp of a girl appeared in the gangway, with a sailor loaded with paraphernalia including an expensive dressing-case. The rouge and powder on her baby pouting face only emphasized its fragile youthfulness. She stood in front of Mr. Buffum, in obvious despair, looking blankly at him.

" Ah yes—eer—I fesh shair," said the sailor, genially dropping his burdens and lurched adroitly off.

Mr. Buffum wondered where she thought of finding any place. He watched her standing, swaying—why she would fall over—poor girl—quite alone—and she seemed past caring whether she stood or fell. Mr. Buffum suddenly got up and supported her with his arm. She leaned against him without a word.

The pacers on the deck pushed clumsily by, angry that their promenade was thus obstructed by fresh luggage and standing passengers. The sailor returned with a chair. Mr. Buffum gently lowered the girl into his own chair : she closed her eyes with a whispered " Thank you." The French sailor became voluble as by dint of much squeezing and adroit arrangement, he found a place for the chair and swiftly packed up the luggage ; putting Mr. Buffum in the chair and on his lap the girl's dressing-case, which he patted many times shouting hoarsely in Mr. Buffum's ear : " 'Er ticket's 'ere."

So Mr. Buffum was distracted from his own distress. He eyed the girl who lay limp and oblivious in the

chair ; thin stockings and absurd shoes were to be seen emerging from under her travelling coat.

He who was staggered by the thought of merely looking after himself was now required to look after a frail and costly other. He had seen one passenger near him acquire an oilskin coat. Those daintily stockinged legs were getting soaked : and heavens ! the first douche of spray came swishing : his own place was now more exposed. He eyed the girl again : her face was trickling. He leaned right forward and looked round the partition on his left, behind which a watchful sailor lurked. He saw a man and beckoned, who smiled and advanced with a basin.

Mr. Buffum took the basin and managed to explain by dumb show that he required an oilskin to cover his companion, which the man produced and Mr. Buffum wrapped carefully round the limp oblivious form ensconced in his own late chair. She slightly snuggled but took no further notice.

An official chose this happy moment to tear coupons from books and to hand out landing tickets—while the boat rose and fell and quivered and the spray dashed wildly over the deck. Calmly and collectedly like a courteous inspector in an omnibus in Oxford Street, he came nearer and nearer on the crowded deck, politely disregarding the state in which any of his clientele might be—kindly relentless and insistent.

Mr. Buffum had his own ticket within reach. He leaned towards the girl and said : " Your ticket's wanted," but she took no notice : and none when he repeated his words : which put him, he considered, in a most awkward and stupid position, holding her expensive dressing-case on his lap. He couldn't make himself responsible for the child. What ought he to

do? Her pluck in travelling alone seemed now preposterous folly.

He was handing the bland official his ticket, who pointed and smiled at the lady, and Mr. Buffum found himself struggling to open the case in which he knew her ticket lay—the official kindly helped him, leaning at an angle to keep his balance against the spray-filled wind. Between them the case opened, and from a dishevelled heap of bank-notes, the ticket was extracted and eventually replaced, and the official passed, leaving Mr. Buffum aghast at this wisp of a girl's recklessness with money, aghast, too, at holding her landing ticket with his, pinched between thumb and forefinger.

Only the tail of the spray dashes hit him, but a small river flowed over his feet and he was getting sufficiently wet. There seemed no reason why the full spray-dash should not hit him, and if it did, he would be drenched to the skin.

Words were blown to him. "I bet you a pound she does turn up . . ." "About half an hour more: half-way now."

And then Mr. Buffum began to learn how long half an hour might be—his previous experience before the boat started, appeared now to have taught him nothing.

An elderly lady exactly behind him, whom he had feared the sailor inconvenienced with his chair, waved feebly but frantically: an alert sailor attended to her, and her distress was terribly near to him. He squinted round tremulously over his right shoulder, hoping against hope she would be careful. The girl in front was groaning loudly and piteously: her parents were suffering. His own little wisp of a girl looked greenish white under her make-up—the movement of the vessel rolled her little body to and fro in the chair—

her head seemed deadly limp on her little neck—a terribly pathetic sight without any doubt, and what he was to do with her and her baggage in addition to himself and his baggage at Calais, Mr. Buffum was at a loss to conceive. He nearly shook her angrily to consciousness of the ludicrous position, and to explain that however competent and elderly and reliable he might appear, he ought by rights himself to have brought a nurse to look after him, and not be posing as an escort to any elegant expensive damsel in distress. Her mistake was vast and rudimentary. Moreover, if the sea continued to grow rougher as it did, he might, like herself, lose what little consciousness he once possessed and have to be removed, a limp soaked bundle in the arms of those whose business it was to clear the decks of encumbrances for the return passage to Dover.

And the sea was growing rougher. Mr. Buffum watched the large waves rise and the boat heave up on their rising mass, then down with a timber-quivering thump, with sea looming above in place of sky ; heard the crash of water, the long swish of the spray. The size of the thing that carried him had undergone a fantastic change, from a cumbrous enormous edifice to be propelled by a mass of machinery through a pond to a trivial tin toy, the battered sport of living angry waters, that this little weak and shuddering absurdity should have the power to reach a destination through this wilderness of enraged enemies, arrayed in seething phalanxes against her, seemed a mad assumption.

There followed a time when the waves became frantic like hounds at an escaping prey—they towered and lashed and struck, stretching long necks ; the boat seemed to pause, shaking : the spray-dash was hurled in blinding volumes—excitement overcame fear

in Mr. Buffum, he was in the tremendous thick of a magnificent struggle against huge odds . . . and then abruptly the boat seemed to ride majestic over a diminished sea and go proudly forward like a stately dame emerging from a crowd of spitting urchins. Mr. Buffum refrained from cheering. He sat very still. The rows of inanimate creatures, huddled like dejected hens around him, stirred and became men and women. They sat up and took notice. Words of command were heard : a bell was rung.

But the little wisp of a girl lay inert by Mr. Buffum, who wondered whether to tuck the dressing-case into her chair and escape, or gently to shake her and explain the situation. But he could take no initiative : he did nothing but sit and wonder and wait. They'd have to be got off the boat somehow, he supposed. And then it suddenly occurred to him with astonishment that he had not been sick, that he was merely a little wet and cold and felt remarkably keen and well.

He got up, and left his chair and looked at the coast of France, now so near that he saw the harbour's mouth—and little Frenchmen—people dotted on the stout harbour wall. The moment's thrill of adventure came and left him aware that the rain had stopped and a wan sun was struggling with the many clouds.

He turned to look once more at that wretched wisp of a girl who still showed no signs of animation. Good Lord ! He was carrying her expensive dressing-case—and landing ticket. He hurried back guiltily to her side, thankful she had not awakened to catch him making off with her money.

He succumbed on his chair, and in spite of the increasing bustle and in spite of the growing excitement of those around him, he sat and waited. Then sadly

he pulled his shirt cuff down to refresh his memory with the jotted numbers of coach and compartment, and through all his troubles emerged innocent pleasure at his foresight.

The wisp of a girl remained inanimate, whether from complete assurance or complete inanition, Mr. Buffum would have given much to ascertain. She had dropped like a wounded gull, as it were, from the blue upon his lap, he must wait for her to open her wings and fly off from his lap into the blue.

Yet he beckoned a watchful sailor and pointed to his luggage and to hers, not quite comprehending the responsibility which he thereby assumed, until he heard the word "Madame" and realized that the sailor was sympathizing with him over his wife's collapse—an error which he was forced to leave uncorrected.

The sailor, himself no doubt a family man in moments of leisure, turned his face away and waited, not wishing to pry into the methods a fellow husband might think proper to take in rousing his partner to face life's duties with becoming spirit—that constant marital obligation.

Necessity urged Mr. Buffum to action. He gently began to remove the oilskin from the snuggled form from which came dimly but clearly a little petulant whisper slightly foreign in accent: "There's never any hurry": and gloved fingers closed on the oilskin as though—Mr. Buffum was embarrassed to find himself thinking—the oilskin were a quilt.

As Mr. Buffum leaned over her, two young men hurried by along the now emptying deck and the words, excitedly uttered, "Where is she? Where can she be? What *rot*! She must be somewhere!" reached his ear: but other people's troubles, however

poignant, had no power at that moment to pierce his own anxiety and touch his sympathy.

Not roughly but very firmly, Mr. Buffum began to unpeel the oilskin from the reluctant girl, whose grip on the collar and wriggling resistance belied her previous weakliness. But her voice saying, " I must be looking too frightful ! " was so indubitably pitiful that he felt a male brute for his second's doubt of her.

The deck was now quite empty. Slowly the wisp of a girl got up, dizzy and dazed like one returning from the tomb : and Mr. Buffum was obliged to encircle her with his arm.

" Wait, oh, please wait ! I can't . . . " her plaintive voice implored, as she leaned limply ; and yet produced with amazing rapidity the vainest of vanity bags from her wrist, and Mr. Buffum could have sworn, though he was too much of an old-fashioned gentleman to make sure, that the preposterous creature was well enough to be carrying out that part of her toilet which applied to her baby face.

The patient sailor proved his staunchness as a fellow man, by a kindly look in which there was no trace of mirth or mockery. He knew all too well, the look declared, what an honest family man is called upon to contend with—" Ah ! ces femmes ! " was borne upon that bleak breeze as upon so many others.

Mr. Buffum could but wait patiently, too. Movement lent litheness to the form he was supporting : her preparations finished, an amazing change to weakness occurred : one spurt of vanity, his kindly nature thought, gave the poor thing an instant's magic strength.

She leaned against him ; she clung to his arm, and Mr. Buffum observed with another shock of surprise, an absurd little black lace veil that reached the tip only of her slightly tilted nose.

"You can walk?" he asked.

"Why? Would you like to carry me?" a faint voice murmured, and the form clung closer, trembling—with cold, of course, and weakness. The deck was empty: the ladder staircase was empty—fortunately. They must be the very last to be leaving the boat. . . . Yet at the foot of the staircase the preposterous creature called another halt. She produced from nowhere a feathered ornament the colour of a gold crest's crown, which every one in the world but Mr. Buffum knows is the distinguishing mark of José Marina, whose escapades, invariably original, finished the havoc which her features and film acting wrought upon the whole world's heart. The patient sailor glimpsed the bright ridiculous cockade, and electrified, stared; then bounded forward shrieking:

"La Belle. La belle José! La Voila."

The middle-aged but ardent and patriotic mayor of Calais claimed distant kinship with the Star, and had arranged a small civic welcome, for the moment when her dainty foot first touched French soil after seven strenuous years at Hollywood, to which the clever José had, as she always managed to do, kindly contributed with the help of Mr. Buffum, the dramatic element of surprise.

She now whisked off her travelling coat, which she threw over Mr. Buffum's arm, tucked back her veil and appeared resplendent like a Red Admiral emerging from a chrysalis.

Mr. Buffum would have retreated, but with unerring instinct our José had picked once more the right man to play opposite her in the forthcoming little scene, and escape was impossible, even if he had been allowed a hiding-place in the returning vessel. He was obliged to face the music in solemn fact as well as solemn

symbol, because as they appeared on the head of the gangway and a smiling official took their tickets, bowing, a band burst into a fanfare of welcome, and Mr. Buffum stood before a cheering waving crowd—his hand now held and patted like a stage property by the vociferous happy crowd's adored one. Children raced up the gangway presenting beribboned bouquets a little damp, and beribboned boxes of bonbons a little bedraggled, which were handed over to Mr. Buffum's unoccupied hand and arm to manage—a perilous pile. A frenzy of waving hats and handkerchiefs, volleys of cheers greeted the reception of each token: and the world's beloved kept squeezing and shaking Mr. Buffum's hand, between the kisses she blew to that insignificant section of her great world of lovers, which was arrayed before her.

The World's Beloved the ardent Mayor eloquently named her in the brief and telling speech of welcome which, amid a hushed silence, he now advanced to deliver. A storm of cheering greeted its conclusion; the darling impetuous José let go of Mr. Buffum's hand for a moment to fling her arms round the Mayor's neck and kiss him on both cheeks: to jump back at once and reclasp the bewildered Mr. Buffum's hand.

The Mayor, now very naturally beside himself, was not backward in returning the salute, which thrilled him with such feeling for all mankind that he put his arms wildly round Mr. Buffum's neck, whose hands and arms were too full—his heart no doubt also—to offer any resistance, and kissed him loudly upon both astonished-cheeks, amidst delirious shouts of joy from those whose emotion had been roused to fever heat by the initial disappointment, the feature of their favourite's ingenious little plan.

She now took one step forward, still clasping Mr.

Buffum's unresisting hand. First she stood quivering on her toes, her little head raised, chin up, like a paramount little queen, then she drooped like a frail child and leaning slightly forward spoke in a low, clear, slow voice—and the gist of her speech was this :—" Oh Friends, thank you, Friends. I have friends all over the world and oh I value their kind thoughts. But none more than this dear friend of mine "—she dragged poor Mr. Buffum forward. " He is truly a noble fellow : he tended me not knowing who I was, tended me as a mother might a sick child. Englishmen can be so dense (Mr. Buffum was never quite sure whether he heard her actually pop in the swift aside or whether it was a trick of his accusing fancy). It's lovely to have friends everywhere. How I thank you Monsieur the Mayor. Oh how I thank you all . . . "

She retired behind the shelter of Mr. Buffum's arm from where she blew kisses. Her shoulder gently propelled him forward into the shouting crowd. The band played furiously : confetti and paper flowers were flung on the couple as they advanced through the tumultuous ranks. Men and women kissed the hem of her dress, kissed the air near her : men and women patted Mr. Buffum on shoulder and back. Round to the left along by the great Blue Train they made their triumphal way, the loud band falling in behind them, to where officials stood bowing and smiling by a compartment hung with damp flags and decorated with damper streamers. And over this beautiful scene the sun himself did not refuse to flicker palely.

Mr. Buffum began to mutter to himself : " I must find my own compartment. I must find my own compartment," as the paralysis of this frantic publicity began to lessen its choking grip upon his faculties. But no one took any notice of his murmured plaint.

She pulled him gently up by her side on the platform at the entrance to her coach—the crowd surged round, and as the train moved slowly off, the World's Beloved put her arms round Mr. Buffum's neck and embraced him—a lovely departing picture—in a long and lingering embrace.

"Oh thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" she wrung his hand to say, and disappeared into her compartment.

For what he was being thanked Mr. Buffum was never quite sure, but he was glad to be left once more in his own quieter and less brilliantly lighted world. He stood for a moment in bewildered thought, then dropped the bouquets and bonbons in a gentle heap on the floor, and crept swiftly away along the corridor in search of his own compartment, terrified lest he might meet the perfect gentleman who had so awed him a few hours only before in the sombre English train.

CHAPTER IV

MR. BUFFUM ON THE BLUE TRAIN

AT length Mr. Buffum found his own compartment, with the help of one of the many kindly little men in olive uniform.

"But where is Monsieur's baggarge?"

"I don't know," groaned Mr. Buffum.

The kindly little man in green shrugged his shoulders and lifted the palms of his hands in a gesture of complete despair to another little man in green, the attendant of Mr. Buffum's own coach, his bedmaker, valet and general guardian to be.

It was bad enough to have entered the Blue Train in the way he had; to be called upon to give an account of its nightmare magnificence seemed unnatural brutality—especially to men who, however kindly, were not too familiar with his own dear mother's tongue. Mr. Buffum felt so small and so shy and so unimportant and so unhappy at that moment that, though he stood above the little officials in green, he nearly rubbed red knuckles into a puckering face.

"And soon the examination," one began.

"Of baggarge for contraband" . . . the other took it up intently nodding: then both kept very still, considering the situation with their heads cocked to one side fixedly like birds inspecting a lawn for worms. Then, suddenly, one brightened and struck the other gaily on the chest with the back of his gloved hand, and Mr. Buffum guessed in horror that his false

identity as escort had been discovered. They chattered and laughed and bowed. All would be well. Every compartment through the whole length of the train would be gladly searched; a man so noble must suffer no inconvenience from his gallantry.

Mr. Buffum was sat down in his half-compartment —a smaller box he had never sat in—and left in peace for a moment. But here he was obliged to face another form of publicity and a worse: for whereas in his late adventure he had been dragged from his modest obscurity to exposure to countless eyes, now, wherever he looked, his own disconsolate features were exposed to his own gaze. The small box seemed made of looking-glass.

Mr. Buffum was not a vain man. He tried to forget the face which he carried about with him for every one who liked to inspect. Never more than now was he in the mood to forget it. But that face confronted him perpetually, and in whatever position he sat he could not shift himself from the painful sight of his own close-up. He frowned: it frowned. He searched its features for signs of hitherto unsuspected intelligence: it searched his. Both were unsuccessful in their search. He smiled at his folly: it, smiled, too.

"I am overwrought," he thought, "by all this excitement," and leaned back his head to sleep. It leaned back also, and peeked at him out of the corner of its eye, as though it were anxious to ascertain what he looked like—dropping asleep.

"This will never do!" He sat up sternly and struck fist on palm in the manner of a resolute man. It did likewise: and its assumption of angry fortitude was very far from impressive.

Poor Mr. Buffum had thought the Blue Train would be an adventure in luxury: he found it, however, to

be a severe moral lesson on the text " Know Thyself ! " and to this he resigned himself sadly, pulling a face, which it pulled too.

But the lesson was momentarily interrupted by the return of the kindly little men in green who had discovered his luggage.

They packed it on the rack with many smiles and much talk : and managed to convey to Mr. Buffum the information that custom officials would soon be paying him a visit ; at which Mr. Buffum noticed his close-up attempt to assume a look of unconcern ; the attempt appeared feeble and the bulge of his unduly large flask of brandy in his overcoat pocket appeared at the same time enormous.

No sooner was the door shut on him in his rumbling looking-glass box than with fumbling fingers he extracted the large flask from his pocket, unscrewed its top, and poured out a peg, both to lessen the amount of contraband he carried and to prove that he carried it solely for medicinal purposes.

The drink refreshed him and would have tuned him better up, had he not been disgusted by the fatuous look of confidence which his close-up brightly assumed. Moreover he had spilt some and the small compartment reeked of spirit. While he was vainly trying to open a window, an authoritative knock on his door startled him. The door was opened, he was in the presence of an armed gendarme and of a dignified official who inquired if he had anything to declare. Mr. Buffum shook his head and murmured—*Riang*. The only thing he could have declared was the utter absurdity of his being there at all and not at his quiet home in Sussex ; and he was on the point of declaring this with fervour, when the official bowed and retired and passed on with his satellites.

"Well," thought Mr. Buffum, "these are my quarters for many hours to come . . ." and he remembered that he had never before in his life had a whole carriage, however small, reserved to his own use. He began to examine it as though it were a new toy; switching the lights on and off, fiddling with the table that had at first pressed into his side, and which he now found opened and contained a wash-hand stand: he turned on the tap; undid a small cupboard which disclosed a towel—most ingenious, oh, most ingenious! —a great idea came to him; to wash his face and hands, but try as he would he could find no appliance by which to stop the water from running out of the basin, so he did his best under the running tap, and was delighted to realize that he was travelling with his own private bathroom and that he could, whenever he pleased, at any moment of the day or night, wash both hands and face. It gave him the same quiet sense of power that a knife gave him in his boyhood, which contained as well as several blades a corkscrew and instruments for removing thorns from fingers and stones from the hooves of horses, ponies or donkeys.

Having exploited the pleasures of the washstand and restored it once more to the discreet semblance of a table, Mr. Buffum turned his attention to the windows. They were the last word of comfort, ingeniously devised to admit the exact amount of fresh air anyone might want with the smallest amount of smoke and cinders: but unfortunately Mr. Buffum was baffled by their complexity, and was totally unable to move them one way or the other. Mr. Buffum felt confronted by a puzzle which it was up to him to solve: he was man enough to dislike being beaten by any contrivance; moreover, if he were to travel in any sort of comfort, it was necessary that he should

be master of the situation. He would have pressed the small push bell, labelled attendant, had he not remembered in time that he did not wish the window opened; but only to know how the window did open: a very different matter, and far too difficult to explain. Moreover, his modesty shrank from so gross a confession of ignorance as not to know how to open a window; for as one thing leads to another the attendant would probably gather that this was his first journey by the Blue Train—or if such windows were standardized, on any Continental train.

But his efforts were not wholly wasted. His hands were black; and with quiet unconcern, like a man who knows his way about, Mr. Buffum transformed the table into a washstand, and washed his hands carefully and well, after employing a few minutes in a fresh but unavailing study of how to stop the water from running out of the basin.

He was engaged in drying his hands on the small damp towel when his door was tapped and opened, and a sour young man in cheerful uniform murmured something crossly.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Buffum, guiltily, knowing that he was using his washstand more like a plaything than was proper, and the young man explained, with a new grievance at having to repeat himself, that two dinners were served, one at 7, the other at 8, and he would be glad to know which Mr. Buffum proposed to honour by his presence. A multitude of reasons for choosing either rushed through Mr. Buffum's head, but he said *second* not liking to keep the young man waiting. He, unconciliated, remarked "Seven then. The first. I call you," and shut the door.

Somehow the time passed till dinner, enclosed with

himself in the rumbling looking-glass box which seemed to become smaller and smaller. His attendant came in to tell Mr. Buffum mysteriously that there was a more comfortable compartment unoccupied in which he would find his bed made when he returned from dinner. Mr. Buffum would have preferred to remain where he was, on the good working assumption which makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others which we know not of. But that was not to be. Mr. Buffum was solemnly thinking how proper a punishment it would be for a criminal thus to shut him up in a compartment faced with his own image for hours on end—and how perhaps if he were a spirited citizen he ought to start a small society to agitate for this reform in our penal system, when he was summoned to dinner.

And now that it was incumbent on him to wash his hands and brush his hair before eating in public, he forgot both simple duties until he had passed through too many swaying coaches of the interminable train to feel that return was in any way possible. He noticed, moreover, that other men sauntered along the corridor without their hats, and his own squash hat was firmly pressed upon his head. He hastily removed it; then nonchalantly put it on again, grateful at any rate that his own close-up was not mimicking his sly manœuvres.

"I'm probably walking in the wrong direction," he sadly thought in spite of the people in whose company he moved. . . . He struggled along from coach to coach. It would have been wiser to have stayed where he was. A human being could live, he remembered, for forty days without food: he had enjoyed a good, if hurried breakfast. This bondage to meals was an absurdity.

But he reached the restaurant car, which was already crowded. He stood wondering where he should sit. The manager briskly approached and firmly bowed

him to a seat at a table at which three large elderly ladies were already sitting. Mr. Buffum shyly smiled. The ladies looked at him with interest, wondering no doubt, how he could get to the corner seat at their table. Mr. Buffum wondered, too, and waited. He was thin : but not even a snake could have wriggled to that corner seat without assistance, and people still came in in whose way Mr. Buffum was standing. The manager noticed this obstruction, and bore down upon the offender—gesticulating.

" Perhaps Madame would permit Monsieur to pass ! "

Mr. Buffum murmured apology, as the stoutest lady began to hoist herself up from her seat, glaring at Mr. Buffum for his inconsiderate presence. She at last stood up and waited with her head thrown back for Mr. Buffum to pass by, as a stall-holder stands for the passing of a late-comer. But alas ! the table still pressed against her.

Luckily the manager came once more to his assistance. He gripped the stout lady's arm, and steered her out with considerable difficulty, while she complained loudly at being thus disturbed. And Mr. Buffum sympathized strongly ; after the extreme difficulty of wedging herself in, it was really unfortunate that she should be asked to wedge herself out again, and that, too, for the sake of such a very insignificant fellow as himself. He sincerely hoped that her struggles would benefit her to some extent by an improvement, say, in her appetite.

Mr. Buffum squeezed hurriedly into his corner, and tried to obliterate himself behind a menu card, while her friend assisted his neighbour to reseat herself, saying bluntly and very unwisely Mr. Buffum thought : " I told you to ride this side, Emily."

" With my back to the engine Jane ? ! " the other

snorted, settling herself, and overlapping upon Mr. Buffum, though he shrank into his corner.

"Oh! won't you change places with me," the third lady, unattached to the two friends, impulsively suggested out of kindness that was genuine, if a little unthinking.

" Too good of you ! " she was answered, and natural resentment at Mr. Buffum's intrusion formed an immediate bond between the three.

The ladies opposite to him were not so stout as the lady beside him, but were on the ample side.

Mr. Buffum pondered, " I thought the modern woman was slim and fast and wicked," and he could not help feeling a little bitter about it. These ladies were certainly not slim ; they were evidently slow and their goodness, he was sure, advanced far beyond suspicion. In fact, they belonged to his own generation : he should have felt quite at home and at ease in their company—his conscience told him ; yet his illogical old heart rejoiced that Niece Lucia, whose very modern speech and manner and general attitude towards life was a constant worry to him, could never under any circumstances be suspected even of developing into this respectable maturity, which now enclosed him : and which for all its distastefulness to him was yet the fate which he felt all really good women should be ready to accept as theirs at the earliest possible moment—crown it, indeed as his mother had done, with the lace-cap of resignation.

But rightly speaking, Mr. Buffum excused himself, they should not really be sitting in the Blue Train at all, unless perhaps they were members of the Committee of some earnest Society formed to combat vice and extravagance upon the Riviera.

Whatever their mission, however, Mr. Buffum felt inexcusably male and out of place in such proximity

to them. Whereas, too, he had noticed the temperature of his box to be a little warmer than he liked he soon discovered that the temperature of the crowded dining-saloon was much warmer than he could bear. Obviously he had avoided sea-sickness only to be caught by the worse snare of train-sickness, for which no preparations of any kind were made. And all retreat was irrevocably cut off. He could not bring himself to insult his stout neighbour by asking her to allow him to pass—still less to make a confession so ignominious. He must simply hang on until these good women had wiped their mouths for the last time and of their own accord had left his exit open.

Why had he been foolish enough to leave his quiet home in Sussex to undergo such torture as was now his? He toyed with the minute portion of something which his first effort to cut turned from a helping to a mess on the plate, which he could gratefully leave.

He nibbled his roll and noticed without enthusiasm the eagerness with which his companions attacked the one simple pleasure that was left them. The courses made up in length and number what they lacked in substance. Mr. Buffum's head throbbed so giddily that he lost the sense of direction in which the brilliantly lit saloon was roaring through the night: and nothing is more embarrassing than not to know whether you are being propelled forwards or backwards—or rather which forwards and backwards is.

"The place is so stuffy," one of his companions remarked. "I've hardly been able to swallow a mouthful." And Mr. Buffum was thankful that he was not called upon to argue the truth of the statement. Yet when her newly made friends implied immediate agreement by saying, "Oh shameful!" Mr. Buffum

was stirred to sudden anger : it was bad enough that they should impose their large persons upon him : it was intolerable that they should also impose their gross distortions of fact. He felt false and weak for not stating firmly and with authority : " On the contrary, you have all three eaten with extraordinary heartiness ! " But the moment passed and truth was once more left unchampioned. Indignation, however, moved him to pour himself out a glass of water, which diffidence had long kept him from doing : and he bore without quailing their scrutiny of this gesture of self-assertion on his part. He knew he was defiant but did not mind.

But this spurt of arrogance in him was quickly damped by the shock of the manager's appearance and the necessity of paying the bill in foreign notes and making a suitable tip in foreign money. He took the franc as a shilling and was appalled by the extravagance of the dinner to which he had done such trifling justice. Moreover the shilling in motley change which he pushed across the table towards the bill-maker was first eyed with disdain, then contemptuously ignored, then openly repudiated with :

" Ah : that belongs to Monsieur ? " spoken with withering sarcasm which poor Mr. Buffum was already too withered to observe. Too high a voltage on the death-chair leaves the condemned intact. Mr. Buffum smiled wanly and could not imagine why the sad little pile should be left untouched on the table, or why the stout ladies should simper.

He merely bowed his head lower and was grateful to notice that they were preparing to let him out of the hot trap, in which dinner had caught him.

He staggered back, unrefreshed, along the swaying corridor of the interminable train. He didn't know

where he was: there had been talk of Paris at the awful meal—but you couldn't surely pass through the capital of so large and civilized a country as France with no other sign of life than a long wait—no one had got in or out—there had been no shouting, no stir, nothing.

Mr. Buffum's little attendant in green showed him with pride his new quarters: a bed made up in one compartment, his coat and things were placed in the other—a small suite was now at his disposal. He was travelling in greater luxury even than he had paid or hoped for: he now had a choice of wash-hand stands—four corners in any of which he might sit; a bed complete with pillow and eiderdown in which he might lie.

But he was too hot and too upset and too embarrassed to be able to take advantage of all this comfort.

"Pack all your night-things and go to bed just exactly as you do at home," Niece Lucia had cheerfully assured him: and all his night-things—even the bed socks he always wore in winter—were packed in the leather bag on the rack above his head. Yet he sat, his arms limply hanging by his side, quite unable to begin the daily task of undressing. The train rumbled and swayed through the night. Mr. Buffum sat looking at the neat bed, and wondering how much or how little clothing he need remove before submitting himself to its embrace. He never travelled in a first-class carriage even on a suburban line in any but his very best suit: and now he was called upon to remove his trousers in a train de luxe, rushing by night through a foreign land, miles and miles away from home. There was a suitability in all things, which Mr. Buffum modestly did his best always to find and to follow; his keen sense now felt that innate suitability to be

in danger of outrage. How could a shy man be expected to face the outside world of strange faces and foreign eyes, which might at any moment intrude upon him, without his collar, without his boots, braceless, trouserless, totally unprepared for any emergency? It was asking too much. Yet merely to sit through the long hours of the night and look at the bed that had been prepared for him was silly.

Mr. Buffum began slowly to unbutton his waistcoat —slowly to untie his tie. To disrobe in the rumbling carriage of a train seemed to his tired mind even more incongruous than to disrobe in a motor omnibus. But it is the first step which counts. His stud which holds together a man's dignity as well as the wings of his collar, was in his trouser pocket: his fingers, pushed up under the flaps of his waistcoat, were actually toying with brace-tab and trouser button.

But before loosening this last support of all righteousness, he stooped to undo his shoelaces—while the long train sped in the January night at fifty miles an hour through a foreign country.

What, he wondered, were his stout table companions now doing? The thought roused no wanton smile, but enfeebled him with dismay. To remove his defences and to lie peacefully unclad in night attire in such a terribly new world as that through which he was now being relentlessly hurried, touched the very top of fantastic absurdity, whose height grew more giddy with every mile he was carried from his quiet home in Sussex. He felt like a three-weeks' old tiddler emerging from the stap to fend for himself in a world of various enemies, men, weasels, owls, and foxes.

But with the courage of despair he removed his loosened shoes and manfully began to unbutton the brace-tabs from his trousers. Sitting, he worked off

his trousers and became, what even an alderman or a Lord Mayor must at times become, that most painful of all absurdities, a man in a crumpled shirt.

Haste was now his only help—he snatched his bag from the rack, snapped it open, seized out his pyjamas, pulled them on, flung off his coat and waistcoat, peeled off his shirt and squeezed into bed, where he lay quaking like a hare in its form after a long chase.

Mr. Buffum from his hiding-place eyed the sad disorder of his apparel: under no circumstances could clothes be allowed to be in such heaped disarray, even if the pockets did not contain money and tickets and valuables which he could ill afford to lose: he squeezed reluctantly out of his tight little bed—shook out his shirt and vest, removed the pants from his trousers which he folded—hung his coat over his pillow, laid his wound watch on the table—and strengthened by these seemly actions and the defiant refusal to clean his teeth, he laid himself down once more, almost with dignity, in bed. But the bedclothes, tucked in with ferocity, gripped him like swaddling bands, and to turn on his side, or raise the turned-down flap over his shoulder was wellnigh impossible. He managed it somehow and lay with closed eyes, composed for sleep. The sense of sight thus obscured, his other senses became more alert to the rampant noise of the train, as the wheels rumbled and jolted over the metal rails. Composed for sleep! He lay like some mediæval saint on a grid of vibrant noise. He lay, motionless and patient, but chafed and heated, while the bedclothes bound down his aching body like tightening ropes.

The atmosphere too, was bright and stifling, the window must be opened: he dragged himself stickily from the bed of torture and struggled gamely to let air into the hot cage. At last the window jerked down-

wards: a rush of night air struck his heated body like a cold shower—dirty with smoke of soft coal. He climbed back into the tight bed and to his past discomfort was now added a mildly foul persistent smell. Into whatever position, too, he struggled under the constricting sheets, an icy little draught pierced neck or cheek or shoulder-blade. Whereas he had felt like a roasted rat in a red-hot cage, he now experienced the sensation of snuggling between ungiving boards while a tiny jet of icy water was played on him.

Mr. Buffum never grumbled: he realized that it was his own inability to make full use of luxurious accommodation that was at fault; he lay still with stoic fortitude; which he could have experienced he sadly thought at a less costly figure.

And then was borne in upon his mind the fact that he must be ill—that he had caught a chill—that he had a slight fever. He accepted the fact grimly; and his mind was quick to see just punishment for wicked folly: in setting off for the South of France in the Blue Train at his time of life. He would arrive delirious no doubt among strangers in a strange land: Niece Lucia would spend a happy holiday, visiting sick uncle . . .

The train was slackening . . . stopped. Mr. Buffum rose to shut the window, and peered out on a desolate scene. The station was Dijon: sleet fell in slanting lines by station lamps—a wet porter dragged a heaped truck along the low platform—the trucks of a shunting luggage train clanged in a siding. It was midnight; he must be nearing the Sunny South; he shivered, forced up the ingenious window, turned out every light and crept back in darkness to his bed, as a man abandons himself to abject woe, when his spirit is vanquished. He lay in aching noisy heat, bitterly

simulating sleep, quite sure now that he was in for a serious illness, welcoming the mockery of it like a just punishment. . . .

He must have slept, though never unaware of the train's noise and jolting, because he opened his eyes to notice the flicker of light behind a blind, the light of some station ; and the light strangely persisted . . . some trick of his disordered eye . . . it could not be morning . . . he had hardly left the doleful sleet of Dijon, that peep into icy desolation. Yet the light persisted . . . could it be day ? He shut tight eyes, angrily incredulous, fearful of teasing disappointment.

At last he stretched a furious hand to pull aside the blind.

Mr. Buffum gasped, sitting propped on his hands, staring : then leaped out of bed and flicked up every blind in both compartments. It was morning ; a magic morning. The train was moving through a smiling country on which the early sun slanted from a cloudless sky—vineyards and olive trees he saw for the first time, and quaint red houses with blue shutters, gaily built to defy hot suns, and sudden pine-clad hills. He saw a stout man in a blue blouse and a puffy black cap walking behind a heavily paniered donkey along a sandy road.

Mr. Buffum laughed softly to himself : " Oh I say ! Oh I say ! " he kept happily murmuring.

He gazed and blinked and gazed : every moment the country-side became more fantastically, more ridiculously lovely and all in a blazing brightness of invincible sunshine. The sun was here no casual summer visitor : the sun here was the very host himself.

Mr. Buffum laughed less softly. He bestirred himself. He stripped and washed more happily though perhaps less thoroughly and less comfortably than in his own bathroom. He dressed with expedition,

stopping every now and then to stare at the fresh loveliness which unfolded itself with generous ease to his astonished eye, as the train wound in between sharp pine-clad hills.

And he was hungry: no lunch, no tea, no dinner to speak of, on the previous day: Mr. Buffum was magnificently hungry.

On this perfectly appointed train he had only to step along a carpeted corridor to the dining-car and order all he wanted; rolls and butter and eggs and bacon and pots—large pots—of coffee.

He slapped his leg and uttered a stupid hoot of laughter; then looking round bashfully as though in wonder at who could have done it, he saw his face in the glass and thought happily "Oh, not too bad, considering." He opened the door into the corridor, actually glad to meet his fellow-men. There stood his little attendant, his green uniform unbuttoned, his hair untidy, sallower after the night, unashamedly sleepy: Mr. Buffum touched his shoulder smiling and remarked:

"Ah! Ker say belle! la Frahnce!"

The little man clicked his lips and nodded. Mr. Buffum became confidential. "Say la premieh fois djay been 'eer."

He dropped his h to be no doubt more idiomatically foreign.

"Thees—nuddings . . . nuddings to what comes . . ." The little man made a violent gesture of disdain, and almost spat at the view before him.

In the dining-car Mr. Buffum ordered the largest possible breakfast and chattered with the manager who had so appalled him the night before, laughing at his silly mistake over the value of the franc and amply correcting it. What coffee! What rolls! He looked up at the people who came in or were sitting about

and was astonished to observe the same immutable expression upon their faces, as though they were too wearily familiar with it all from infancy to notice any change. "Of course the sun is shining. Why else do you suppose we should come here?" Mr. Buffum really could not even pretend to assume this indifference, however beautifully well bred it might be. He openly, silently revelled. And he was to spend three whole weeks in this enchanted land.

"Looks pretty, don't it?" he heard an aristocratic voice murmur between teeth—apologetic for its enthusiasm.

Mr. Buffum was on the bubble. He was impelled to speech and to speech in the language of the adorable country. So he repeated his great sentence beaming to the waiter:

"Say la premieh fois djay been dong le Sood de Frahnce!"

"Vair goot," answered the waiter with many nods and smiles.

"Aprèss Marseilles! Ah!" He spread out his palms and looked to Heaven: then lowered his eyes, waggling his palms so that Mr. Buffum felt that tongue and lips were the least expressive part of him. His whole body talked, and talked, Mr. Buffum soon discovered, without a hint of exaggeration, when the long train wound to the left towards Italy and he took his first good look at the blue Mediterranean—that tideless shining sea of a blue more startling than the intense blue of the sky and yet a soothing blue on which eyes rested happily. From a dark January day of cold wet fog to emerge after a hot noisy night on a sweet May morning was nothing to this awakening after the gloom of London in the smiling South of France.

He caught glimpses of snow-clad mountains; he

saw towering rocks ; vineyards set in steep hill-sides ; roses, olives, pine-trees, boulders, and on each towering rock a perfect castle seemed to have been placed by a hand aware of fairy-tale rightness : and every sight of the sea convinced Mr. Buffum that it was really bluer than he had at first thought.

S. Juan les Pins—Cannes—Nice—Eze. The morning passed in growing rapture. The Blue Train was nearing Cap d'Ail. Reached Cap d'Ail.

Mr. Buffum climbed down from the Blue Train. Niece Lucia and Miss Marion in summery frocks came running towards him, welcoming him, as in some happy dream.

" Oh, this is fairy land ! " Mr. Buffum beamed, " and here are the Queens of the country."

His baggage was handed out, the kindly little attendant in green smiled and saluted : the Blue Train pulled its slow length out of the station.

Mr. Buffum had arrived.

CHAPTER V

MR. BUFFUM VISITS THE CASINO, MONTE CARLO

MR. BUFFUM had been most reluctant to accept Niece Lucia's urgent invitation to come to the South of France and join the party she was with at the Villa Bachlyk. The timid old Sussex sheep, he wrote, would be quite out of place flaunting about at his time of life on the Riviera with rich Americans. But he came. The delight of feeling wanted was too much for him. He bought a new blue suit and came.

And here he actually stood, after many adventures, smiling in the happy sunshine on the platform of Cap d'Ail.

A small boy home for the holidays was like a bald sophisticated Cambridge don compared with Mr. Buffum, as Niece Lucia and her friend Miss Marion led him, each by an arm, to the capacious Delaunay-Belleville. After a winding, steep, chattering little drive they stopped before the tall iron brass-tipped gates of the Villa Bachlyk. Through plate-glass doors framed in ironwork tipped with gay brass, over marble floors into a domed hall—more like a Moorish palace than a house—Mr. Buffum passed and found himself in a marble-floored salon with large windows looking out upon the blue Mediterranean. He found himself shaking the small bangled hand of his American hostess—Mrs. Manning Bruce—and heard her slow voice say, "Now isn't it real nice to be seeing you at last!"

Mr. Buffum had pictured her in his mind as a substantial motherly woman: to cross the Atlantic, to cross Europe, and to take and run an establishment so far from home in so foreign a country needed genuine body of character: but he was doomed, it seemed, always to be mistaken. Mrs. Manning Bruce was if anything slimmer and flimsier than Niece Lucia; not so compact: she floated, as she introduced him to two diaphanous beings, known as Millie and Fudge, who gave the tiniest curtsey over Mr. Buffum's hand, murmuring "Pleased to meet you" and thereby winning his heart at once.

He was sat down in a window-seat. A turn of his head showed the incredible blue sea playing against the rock upon which the villa had been constructed: these incredible beings fluttered round him, waiting on him with a cocktail, a cigarette, a match . . . and without any pronounced Mohammedan tendency Mr. Buffum felt admitted to some sort of dream Paradise. His cheeks began to ache with his large perpetual smile. He was too hugely, too massively entertained to try himself to be entertaining. It was very nice, very, very nice. All to himself, too.

Mr. Buffum disapproved of any woman making up her face, and he thought the process silly for a young girl as well as wrong. These dear young things, however, wore masks adroitly made by face cream and powder, and sticks for lip and eyebrow: they tried their dear little bests to look like seasoned Parisian cocottes, but succeeded only, he noted with pleasure, in looking like the baby dolls which they had but lately left behind them in their nurseries. After all, they were wearing such skimpy frocks that they no doubt felt they must cover their darling faces with something. They lolled with crossed legs, smok-

ing Lucky Strides, holding Venetian cocktail glasses in daintily manicured fingers—room-mates from Vassar, he gathered ; little pets, he knew.

And then he spoke like one in a dream, without taking thought, voicing something which came up like a small bubble from a deep well : " I'm sure it's all quite wicked and quite wrong, but, oh dear ! I do enjoy it ! " There was an instant clamour for Mr. Buffum to explain what IT meant, but he could only blush and wave his hand in an inclusive circle and beam. They were still pressing for explanation when he was led off to his room, and Mr. Buffum fondly hoped that the inconvenient start of his statement might be forgotten in the indubitable truth of its finish. But that was not to be. At luncheon, while he was enjoying food so delicious that it ought only to grace a feast or treat, and not to be taken ever as a routine meal, Miss Millie turned her exquisite little smiling mask and asked with shy innocence :

" What is all wicked and wrong, please, Mr. Buffum ? "

And put the lipstick she was delicately applying to lips which food and drink had naturalized back into her naughty little vanity bag. He could not say, " You, dear child, from top to toe," as he thought ; nor could he say, " And this luxurious food," as he also thought, with his kind hostess urging him to take more of the best coffee he had yet tasted in his life.

He felt quite pushed against the wall, as though a challenge casually dropped had been seriously accepted. His shy glance took in the smiling, intent faces waiting for his reply, round the lavish table in the fantastic, delightful, high Moorish dining-room opening out of the gay marble-paved salon, saw and heard in the

moment's silence the blue sea on the rocks below outside in the streaming sunshine—and tried to wriggle out by murmuring through his smile :

" My being here at all, you know—the old Sussex sheep—so far from his pasture on the Downs." But Niece Lucia would not let him off ; she wanted him to step right out, as it were, into the very middle of it, certain that the more he showed himself the greater would be his success : so she added demurely :

" Really, dear, it's you and Fudge and us he thinks wickedest and worst . . ."

To which Miss Marion added softly but very clearly : " And enjoys the most."

Mr. Buffum hastened to explain to his laughing hostess.

" You see, girls and . . . and . . . women and all that, they are so . . . so very different from when I was a young man . . . No one can help having ideas, I mean, of his own, you know, and I'm quite, oh ! quite, an old fogey."

The remark declared and established Mr. Buffum. His attitude became a standing jest of the party, to which he never failed most delightfully to rise.

Millie and Fudge teased him outrageously ; and the more they teased him the better Mr. Buffum liked it. Miss Marion and Niece Lucia became, by comparison, elderly sensible friends, to whose companionship he retired for rest and comfort from the little mischiefs.

So towards dinner-time on the first day, after a stroll along the rocky coast, Mr. Buffum felt that he had known them all for years. But when he went to dress for dinner he entered into a private realm of extreme difficulty.

After his terrible experience of the night in the

Blue Train and his wonderful awakening he had been carried along on a wave of excitement clean out of his own small world of careful habit : but a man of his years does not, of course, change his disposition in a couple of days, and he found himself landed very high and very dry in his bedroom on a rocky set of circumstances, his shyness stripped and bare, and he felt suddenly unable to cope with the novelty of the situation, to which he now rated himself for having given no previous thought.

He was not accustomed to dress for dinner at home, where, with the help of kind Eliza, he at any rate knew where his shirt and collar and coat and trousers could be found. Donning his dress suit was always something of a ceremony for which his whole friendly household remained within call to lend a kindly hand. Now he remembered with dismay that he had in thoughtless folly handed the key of his trunk to a foreign maid, and goodness only knew in what drawers and cupboards she had bestowed his attire. Finding things was not among his gifts. It was 7.35, the minutes were ticking by, dinner was at 8. He stroked his chin and it was borne in upon his deep anxiety that he badly needed a shave.

Mr. Buffum shook off the torpor of bewilderment that is prone to sap a shy man's power of action, plucked up spirit, pulled off his coat and waistcoat, loosened his braces, took off his collar and tie, and like a brave and resolute man began to search for his shaving things. But he searched in vain. He moved everything on the washstand and found no trace of soap or brush : he forced open the reluctant drawer with extreme difficulty to no purpose ; which made him sweat so much that he felt the need of a bath. He stood looking wildly round the strange bedroom,

feeling in a nightmare game of hunt the thimble in which his whole reputation and personal dignity were at stake: tall curtains hung before high windows; he rushed towards them and snatched them to one side, but each window-sill was bare. His trousers kept slipping down. He was not dressed for a hunt.

Mr. Buffum was furtively examining his face in the wardrobe mirror to see how badly he really did require a shave when the door was brightly tapped and opened, and through the opening a pleasant girl's voice spoke what Mr. Buffum failed to understand. He could neither say "Entrez!" nor "Getawez!" He was in France, land of seduction, and the South of France, at that. Mr. Buffum quailed as the Swiss maid entered with perfect unconcern and closed the door respectfully behind her.

She tried fluent French, she tried fluent German, but though Mr. Buffum had been to quite a good school, her words had no meaning. Perhaps this was the fault of her Swiss accent; or it may have been that every movement, every gesture, every glance spoke a language of innocent coquetry which dimmed his pure English mind to her simple words of apology for being late in putting out his clothes. Mr. Buffum had learned far more than he realized from his severely middle-class upbringing, in which mere grammar was a small item compared with the numerous moral advantages under which he now sat diminished.

He sat limply on the edge of the bed, watching her, astonished. At length he summoned up sufficient spirit to stroke his cheek with his forefinger, to nod and murmur "shaving things": immediately to become alarmed that his innocent dumb show had been misconstrued by her wicked foreigninity, for she approached him with a bewildered look upon her

pretty face, searching his features with her bold eyes, then soundlessly clapped her hands and brightened, tripping towards a second door, beckoning him to follow—which he humbly, fearfully did, hands in pockets acting as braces to his sagging trousers. There lay his shaving kit long sought, in a perfectly appointed bathroom, containing many contrivances for washing: nor did his total ignorance of their proper usage add to his self-esteem.

Mr. Buffum waited in the bathroom, but as the kind girl showed no sign of departure from his bedroom, he turned on hot water in the basin and began to lather his sad face, remembering too late that no wise man attempts to shave in braceless unbelted trousers that are on the ample side, unless he can be seated before a looking-glass.

As he lathered, he racked his brain for a form of dismissal to the kind girl; he did not wish to be curt or rude: still less did he wish to be in the least encouraging. *Allez vous en* might hurt her feelings: *vous pouvez vous aller vous en* might have a double meaning, or possibly none, which would lead him into the devious path of explanation, which he was not dressed to follow.

Lathered, he stepped through the bedroom door. The room seemed empty: he advanced to make sure.

And worse—incredibly worse—befell him, in one swift horrible second. Scuffling footsteps—the bang of the other bathroom door—laughing low voices—"Coast's clear." "Sure?" "Oh, yes, he's gone down." "Hurry, then!" A prompt "No! I am here" might have saved the situation, which hesitation lost.

And the communicating door was slightly open, he observed to his horror. He stood still as a guilty

mouse. He had been told and he had quite forgotten that Millie and Fudge shared his bathroom. "Did he mind? These foreign villas had no accommodation: only two bathrooms upstairs!" Now at last he understood the full meaning of the words at which, when spoken, he had but vacantly smiled.

Water roared into the bath.

He licked his dry lips and tasted soap: ached to cough: feared to move. The water was turned off. One slapped the other. The slap was returned. Except for sight he was Peeping Tom; and he could not close his mind's eye. Tremendous splashings, "Must have a sponge down."

The soap dried on his drawn face.

"Oh, donkey, don't wet my hair."

Drying, they chattered about their lucky numbers—the lucky day for Monte Carlo. Mr. Buffum was grateful. Imagine what they might have chattered about, girls alone in a bath! "He's a lamb." "Turbly English." "The 'cutest thing." They mimicked the English voice; but Mr. Buffum could not recognize the imitation: he was too distressed no doubt to be fully appreciative. Supposing he had foreseen the plight he was now in, would he ever have left his quiet Sussex home? Never. Never. A voice within him cried. Vanity, sheer vanity, had lured him into this plight. He knew it now, as he stood supporting his loose trousers, fearful of exposure, with the drying soap tightening the skin on his face. Fancy him at his age wanting to cut a figure on the Riviera among wealthy people; fancy him hoping to break the bank at Monte Carlo. He saw himself now in a true light, a figure of fun, a ludicrous spectacle, not knowing the rudiments of decent behaviour. He could not even shut the door.

" Look sharp. We'll be ever so late ! "

He'd better go to bed quietly : he could send a message that he was tired after the journey . . .

But the relief of hearing the outer door slam, the relief of the ensuing silence, gave him strength for action : he ran into the bathroom, locked the door ; hurried back into his bedroom and locked that door too ; shaved, washed, dressed in record time, and was ready when Niece Lucia tapped his door.

" Let's look at you, Old Man," she said, and retied his black tie. Then took his arm in the way he most appreciated and led him down to dinner, saying as she opened the enormous door in a swift whisper : " It just makes all the difference, having you here."

Miss Marion was in the room alone. They made him feel how much they liked him. Mr. Buffum purred like a stroked cat, and yet honesty forced him to confess, " I ought not really to be here," and honesty forced him to add at once, " I'm terribly pleased that I am."

As dinner proceeded (it *wasn't* right to have such cooking included in the home routine, but he relished it ! Champagne poured into glasses too, with no explanatory word, like water) and as the talk touched and settled on lucky numbers, Mr. Buffum came to realize without contrition that the Casino at Monte Carlo was really the goal of this journey ; all his life his mind had pictured it as the gayest, wickedest resort on earth, and now he was within reach he wanted to go there more even than to walk in the moonlight with Miss Marion, much more than to study the natural beauties of the coast, or to visit the museum at Monaco. The evening was spent in his being shown on a toy table the simple mysteries of roulette. His lucky number was worked out with

elaborate care on a sheet of paper ; from the day and year of his birth ; every calculation proved his lucky number to be nine ; the next day was the ninth !

With awed faces under their dolly masks Millie and Fudge announced : " We must sure go to-morrow." It was a marvellous coincidence : Fate ordained that Mr. Buffum should win huge sums. Mr. Buffum towered to heroic stature. The bank was as good as broken. He began to wonder in his kindly diffidence whether it was fair and permissible to profit by such an immense advantage ; but he stilled his conscience by remembering that it was a public, not a private concern.

So this portentous visit was quietly arranged with all the ease of a visit to the cinema at Worthing, which Mr. Buffum occasionally patronized.

Alone, preparing to sleep, he of course smiled at his folly in catching the dear children's enthusiasm for a silly game and in being infected by their quaint belief in lucky numbers ; but the lofty elderly smile did not touch or disturb a certain deep demure confidence that he would win : still less the excitement quivering within that he was actually going to enter the Casino at Monte Carlo.

The morning dragged for Mr. Buffum as slowly and aimlessly, in spite of the novelty and wonder of the place in which he awoke to still, streaming sunshine, as drags a small boy's morning on the day of his visit to the circus.

Millie and Fudge were lunching at Monaco, but they would quit early and meet the others on the steps of the Casino at three. They seemed to know their way about, as though the Riviera were a suburb of Vassar : and their dear dolly faces wore the intent determined look to be seen on the faces of aldermen

and others about to take their place in the Lord Mayor's procession through London.

The drive to Monte Carlo, the sea front by the harbour, the steep harbour hill with its widening view of the coast, the mountain overhanging the cheerful town, the tall palm trees, the roses, bewildered Mr. Buffum: to see such things from the train was one thing, to move in their midst another: he could not escape from the fantastic dream sensation.

Millie and Fudge darted down the long white steps of the Casino like eager little birds. Had he remembered his passport? He had. Such a plan.... He was steered to the left to buy his entrance ticket. Strange liberties were taken with the sound of his name. Taken across to the right to watch his coat and hat disappear up a lift, and there he was at last actually walking without hat or overcoat, as though he were in his own house in Sussex, in the great hall of the Casino at Monte Carlo.

Mr. Buffum held his breath as he passed through the huge glass doors and entered the gaming-rooms. He tried to take in everything at once and saw nothing but a crowd that moved and sat and stood, in an oppressive atmosphere, unrelieved even by tobacco smoke.

So he clung on to his resolution not to spend more than 250 francs on playing chips, while Millie and Fudge unfolded their plan in hushed excited voices. "Fifteen—tens—five twenties: *si vous plait*": and they were pushed across—thrilling heaps—to be disposed in either trouser pocket.

At 3.27 exactly (all threes and nines) he must lay his first stake on 9 and could not fail to win—it was 3.20 now.

"*Messieurs faites vos jeux*," came the monotonous

cry from each table, as they wandered through the crowd, the clatter of the spinning ball, the clear unruffled announcement of the winning number. They took a stand by a table in a far room. Mr. Buffum's head span with excitement as he watched the black-coated keen-eyed croupiers pushing money about with their long sticks. What a number of quite elderly ladies! What were they doing scoring on cricket cards? Mr. Buffum stared round for a happy or excited face. Dull shutters were everywhere up. Restraint? A seat was vacated. They sat him down on it.

"Not this time," Fudge whispered hoarsely in his ear.

"*Messieurs faites vos jeux.*" The eyes of the croupiers coldly pierced the new-comer. *Rien ne va plus.* There was a tense hush. An empty square on the green table was tapped—all the money was raked in, but a stake or two on red and even.

Mr. Buffum fumbled furiously in his trouser pocket, withdrew a piece: waited and at the earliest moment leaned eagerly forward and with trembling stretched fingers placed an English penny on his lucky number 9. He was hardly back in his chair when angry astonished grunts, descending sticks, withering looks, apprised him of his error.

"Oh, I *am* sorry! What a silly mistake!" He gathered up with difficulty his poor little coin; the croupiers, unmoved, stared coldly through him. Mr. Buffum leaned forward, shaking now, to put a red 20-franc chip on 9. The ball span and rattled, *Rien ne va plus.* It stopped. *Huit* seemed to cut his ear. The square next his 9 was tapped. His red piece was nonchalantly scooped back.

"My! how nearly," Millie whispered in his ear:

and Mr. Buffum knew quite for certain that 27 would turn up next. He watched the payments impatiently. Then pushed a 10-franc chip impatiently across the table, saying 27. *Vingt-sept*, interpreted Fudge. *Plein.* And the croupier jerked it without a smile on to the right square. The low numbers were heavily backed. The wheel was spun: the little ball leaped and rattled: *Rien ne va plus. Trent-trois.* "There! two threes," Fudge whispered, pressing his shoulder, and put a metal chip on odd.

Mr. Buffum put two red twenties on black, thinking it wiser to recoup himself before making another proper stake.

To his astonishment and disgust red and even turned up, and his 40 francs were raked in almost before he heard the number called. It was a shock to him. He hesitated. Decided to let the next turn pass. Admired his own wisdom and restraint. Listened with cold indifference to the firm command, *Messieurs faites vos jeux.* "Not this time, thank you," he quite haughtily thought. *Rien ne va plus!* . . . *Neuf*, and nine, his nine, was tapped, which someone else had backed. The imp of chance was simply spiting him. It was a personal affront. He glared round the table. No one took even a mild notice of his angry glare.

"Come on! Let's go to another!" Fudge whispered, pulling his arm. Mr. Buffum got up. He took out his watch, more to soothe his mind than to see the time. He started. It was 3.28. The little idiot's watch was fast. But it was her watch that was out, *not* his luck. Dear me! Dear me! He must not allow himself to become so venomously riled.

He asked her in a gentle voice the French for thirty-six and murmured *trente-six* softly aloud to himself

to be ready for his next stake. "And what's that other thing? On horse back." "*A cheval.*" He had words to murmur. He had his little plan. He'd show them.

They stood by the seated croupier at the top of another table. Mr. Buffum surprised himself by the quiet manner he threw a metal 10-franc chip on the table and said *Trente-six plein* and another metal 10-franc chip saying *A cheval* and shuddered to hear the monotonous cry *Rien ne va plus* as the croupier was actually pushing his piece on the line. A sudden breath-catching, tightening stretch of every nerve in his body. Snap—*Trente-six*—His chip was tapped.

"That's me!" Mr. Buffum cried out in a loud voice, oblivious of the tired scornful eyes that were turned in his direction.

A cheval. A pleasant little pile of chips was being pushed towards him—in which was a large round red one for 100 francs. *Plein*: a pile twice the size he leaned over to gather up, containing two more large round reds.

"Give a twenty for the table," said Millie earnestly, and Mr. Buffum cast twenty francs on the green table with the casual ease of a lord.

He threw a hundred francs on the row 26–27–28 and waited, strung up so tightly that his temples throbbed. *Rien ne va plus* stopped him from putting another red round on 27 full. *Vingt-six*, the voice of the croupier affected Mr. Buffum like a sharp blow on the stomach.

A pile of large red rounds was pushed towards him. He picked them up at last and turned away.

"You must go on," the girls cried, jumping about in excitement. But Mr. Buffum's eye fell on a man's face more drawn and white than he realized a human

face could be. The man's jacket collar was buttoned up. You felt he had pawned his wife's nightgown for money. Mr. Buffum stared. The man staked 100-franc pieces on 20 in every possible way, and when he lost every stake, he staggered as under a too heavy blow. The cold eyes of the croupiers remained on him a little longer than was usual. Mr. Buffum was compelled to look. Again the man, white to his lips, backed 20 in the same reckless way with hundred pieces—even the eyes of a few seated players were turned for a moment in his direction. Mr. Buffum watched him fascinated, not hearing the complaining words of his little friends, not feeling their tugs at his sleeve, glad that they did not seem to notice the terrible drawn-faced man by whose side an attendant happened now to be standing unpresumingly. *Rien ne va plus. Vingt.* The man gasped, bent, staggered, trembled . . . the shock of winning was greater than the shock of losing . . . then tightened to a tensity of control. He was partly paid in wads of notes.

" A little air," murmured Mr. Buffum to Millie and Fudge. " A little fresh air."

" But you ought never to leave your luck," they urged, and begged Niece Lucia and Miss Marion, who wandered up, to use their influence with him. Vermouth and a cigarette, they smiled, following Mr. Buffum, who walked ahead through the crowd strong in mind, though weak in knee.

Mr. Buffum, with a cooling drink that was new to him, and a cigarette, found their earnest prattle soothing : their cocktails, their cigarettes, their nonchalance at the Casino, their smartness of powder and lip-stick and apparel no longer even mildly offended him : they moved unscathed through everything : or

everything passed them by, and he was reminded of the dear child who most devoutly repeated at her kindergarten prayers :

> Our Father, which art in Heaven,
> Harold be thy name,

remembering her favourite among elder friends.

" It's almost too exciting for a Sussex sheep ! " he pleaded against their desire to disturb too soon his enjoyment of the comfortable chair he occupied.

" We'll look after you, Old Man ! " Niece Lucia smiled, and whispered in deep appreciation to Miss Marion, who nodded, laughing, " He is just a boy," and Mr. Buffum overheard the whisper and was not quite sure whether she wasn't right.

CHAPTER VI

MR. BUFFUM GIVES A PARTY

"HER birthday's on the ninth of May."

Mr. Buffum was watching Monnie clean the ancient car. He heard the eager statement, but for the hundredth time he was meditating upon the pleasantness of being in his own home again—in surroundings where the beauty revealed itself to the patient, watchful eye and did not, as in the South of France, blaze and dazzle and shout. So he left the boy's remark unanswered. Monnie stood upright from the wheel over which he had been bending.

"I'm telling you her birthday's on the ninth," he repeated, firmly but without truculence.

"Ah!" said Mr. Buffum. "Yes. I believe it is."

Monnie emptied the bucket over the wheel, refilled it from the rainwater tank, pushed back his cloth cap and asked:

"Well, what are we going to do about it?"

Mr. Buffum delighted in the pronoun. He never regarded Monnie as the gardener's boy (which he was) so much as a slightly smaller and younger human being with an enormous power of enjoyment and a talent for machinery which he himself did not possess. The fact that he paid Monnie's father three pounds a week for his skill in the garden and Monnie five shillings a week for seeing to the car was an accident which Mr. Buffum trusted would never disturb their friendly relations. He was never confident that if the accident

had been reversed and he had been called upon to work in Mr. Monnie's garden, he would have been able to do the job with the same foresight, pertinacity and goodwill that Monnie's father displayed.

Mr. Buffum looked at the boy, smiling. The boy, quite accustomed to the older man's silences, went on :

" I've been thinking about it, Gov'nor, and what I think is " (he paused for emphasis and then said slowly and impressively) " we ought to give a party. A proper birthday party. With ices and cakes and Chinese lanterns and me as page-boy, waiting. I tell yer it wouldn't 'alf be a bloomin' lark."

" Oh ! " said Mr. Buffum, a little taken aback. " You think so ? "

" Yes. I do. And not only me. Mum and Dad does too ! "

" I'm sorry to disappoint you, Monnie. But it's quite out of the question," said Mr. Buffum with quiet deliberation.

" 'Tain't ! " said the boy. " 'Tain't a bit."

" You see," Mr. Buffum explained, " I never properly invite Miss Lucia here ; or her friend. She has a standing invitation, which is a very different thing ; and they just come."

He pressed his little finger far back. " That's one reason. Then a party ! You've really no idea of the sort of party these young people are accustomed to nowadays. From one party to another. Or off to a night club if they are bored." His long third finger came near breaking with the weight of pressure put on it to mark the second reason. " And they are very easily bored, Monnie."

The boy was trying furiously to bring up a polish on the ancient wing. His face and every movement showed obstinate disagreement. Mr. Buffum gave a

kindly smile and said in as soothing a voice as he could command :

" So, you see, for us to think of a proper party would be somewhat . . . somewhat pretentious."

" Pre-hoo ? What's 'ee, then ? " Monnie snapped. Long words often came as an insult. Mr. Buffum was thinking of a commoner equivalent when the boy rapped out :

" You keeps yerself to yerself far too much. We all thinks that."

The charge, especially after his visit to the South of France, seemed hopelessly unjust to Mr. Buffum, even though he was inclined to agree with any stricture upon his own character. He turned sadly away, not because he thought the boy's remark rude and unsuitable, but because he knew that at his age he was what he was without chance of change, and any discussion of the unalterable could only lead to unpleasantness. He wandered away to look at his tall tulips. It would be nicer, of course, for every one concerned if he were a genial easy fellow, sociable and bright and go-ahead. It was unfortunate to be as he was. He tried to imagine Monnie in his place. Then how delightful such a little party as he suggested might be ! But he was not Monnie : he was his own dull self, and must remain so. He owned, too, that he was, on the whole, content to remain so, though he disliked disappointing Monnie. He wandered back to the industrious boy. He was blandly confident, in spite of all experience, that if Monnie realized the complete impossibility of his suggestion, the disappointment would be lessened : on the assumption that no one really desires the moon, when it is recognized as a moon.

" You see, Monnie," he said, " if it were your party, I'm sure it would be a capital plan ; but I am a quite

hopeless duffer at that sort of thing. We none of us can help how we're made, you know."

For answer, the inconsequent creature pulled out from his trouser pocket a large piece of torn newspaper which, on being smoothed out, proved to be an advertisement of an ice-cream freezer.

"Mrs. Eliza says they're rare good value."

Mr. Buffum smelled conspiracy.

"Have you mentioned the party to her?" he inquired.

"'Course. It's her idea me waitin'."

"Ah!" said Mr. Buffum.

"We could buy one in Worthing this afternoon. And Mum says, if we was in Worthing, would you mind me buying some more flannel for Dad's shirts, as she wants more?"

"We could anyhow do that," said Mr. Buffum, glad to be able to agree about something.

He left Monnie and spent a pleasant morning with the boy's father, pricking out nemesia into larger boxes.

At lunch Eliza said to him: "Isn't it lucky, sir, Miss Lucia's birthday should fall on a Saturday this year?"

Conspiracy simply reeked. Mr. Buffum said weakly, "Most fortunate!" hoping the matter would end. It did not end.

"Because if you were thinking of giving a little party to celebrate the occasion . . ." She stopped—uncomfortably for Mr. Buffum, who could never somehow be as explicit with Eliza as he could be with Monnie. Eliza was so capable and firm and kind that he could never escape very far from the sensation of being looked after as a nurse looks after a small boy. Indeed, the idea was not so very far-fetched, for when he came to think of it, as he quite often did, where would he be without kind Eliza to cook for him and clean for

him and make his bed and sew on his buttons and all the rest? Moreover, he had heard her announce, laughing, to Mr. Nicholson the baker: "Men are helpless creatures!" None knew this better than Mr. Buffum, for whom it served as food for much meditation.

Eliza set two pancakes before him, a slice of lemon, soft white sugar.

"No one can make pancakes like you," said Mr. Buffum hopefully, but Eliza knew this so well that she hardly noticed the remark.

"I should let her know as soon as possible."

"But I've never dreamed of anything of the sort!" cried Mr. Buffum, alarmed at this swoop of the enemy upon him.

"Possibly not, sir," replied Eliza, unperturbed. "But if you should, I should be glad of plenty of time for my arrangements."

Mr. Buffum made a gallant stand.

"I suppose, Eliza, you've not already issued invitations?"

"No, sir," she explained, the sharp sarcastic thrust taking no more effect upon her than a sword upon a shadow. "It's only come up in talk, like. I always did think you spoil young Monnie: not but what he's a likeable lad. He said: 'We ought to give you a birthday party, Miss.' And Miss Lucia said: 'Oh, do! What fun!' And since then we have talked, if you understand, of what we might do, if you *did* think of a little party. But, of course, we quite understand it all depends upon you, sir."

Mr. Buffum discharged his last sarcastic javelin.

"Thank you very much for mentioning it."

"Not at all, sir," said Eliza calmly, and quietly left the room, leaving Mr. Buffum aghast at her total dis-

regard of his sarcastic brilliance, which, had he been less pleased at the humour of the position, might have proved more effective.

"They'll be giving this horrible party!" He smiled to himself in dismay.

The door from the House Place was softly opened a little way: a grinning face appeared. A husky, low voice whispered:

"I say, Gov'nor, if we *are* going to have her oil changed . . ." The adjacent kitchen door was smartly pulled open, the culprit seized and dragged forward by a stern Eliza:

"How often have I told you the Master's on no account to be disturbed at his meals!"

As Monnie was taken into the kitchen, he finished his sentence:

"We oughtn't to waste any time."

Mr. Buffum heard what he took to be a lecture proceeding from the kitchen; but the last and only words he actually made out were in Monnie's unmuffled voice: "You are a one!" So he gathered the lecture was not severe enough to call for interruption.

"That boy can do what he likes with Eliza," he thought with a superior smile. "Me spoil him. She's given him a ginger-bread." And dispensing with his usual cigarette, he went out of the dining-room.

They drove to Worthing to get the flannel for Monnie's mother.

Mr. Buffum enjoyed driving so much that he welcomed an errand as mitigating the selfish wickedness of his enjoyment. He knew he was glad that Monnie was too young to drive. Monnie did all the dirty arduous work: he liked changing a wheel; he liked using the grease-gun; he liked pouring in oil; he liked cleaning the car. All this Mr. Buffum detested

as much as he delighted in driving. He faced the position so squarely and felt the unfairness so strongly that Monnie himself had no room as it were to feel it at all, and often chortled to Mr. Buffum on their luck in having a car of their own to play about with, and reminded him of his statement that he would never be able to drive a car.

Monnie's "This is it, Gov'nor: on the right," caused Mr. Buffum to draw up carefully by the kerb. Monnie got quickly out.

"Aren't you comin' in?" he asked eagerly.

"No! No! You can get it. I'll wait here," said Mr. Buffum, and, lighting a cigarette, relapsed into pleasant meditation, watching the people, sitting in his own car . . . from which he was startled by Monnie's voice: "This is our size, Gov'nor: thought you ought to see to make sure!" and surprised at the sight of a shop-assistant on the pavement, carrying what looked to be two neat round covered pails of various sizes.

"What the deuce!" began Mr. Buffum, searching Monnie's face for a sign of something other than guileless innocence and failing to find it.

"This is the size," explained the imperturbable shop-assistant, balancing one pail lightly on the door of the car, "which I should recommend as most suitable for your purpose."

"I say, mind our paint!" put in Monnie earnestly, gazing in rapture at the freezer. Again the humour of the position proved too much for Mr. Buffum's firmness of purpose. What could he do but buy the wretched thing? but have the wretched party? He meekly bought it. Then, desperate, left the car, crossed the road, entered the post office, and sent a reply-paid telegram to Niece Lucia.

Should be so pleased if you could possibly come here

for your birthday. Bring Miss Marion and a boy or two. —Uncle.

He scratched out *boy* and wrote *man*, then scratched out *man* and re-wrote *boy*. Finally scratched out every word after Marion.

The girl treated the portentous message with the appalling calm with which the clerk at a registry office notes particulars for a man's marriage.

It was not easy to stir Mr. Buffum to action, but when once started he was a good goer, almost too good a goer. In this instance, for example, he overran himself a little, for he called personally on two friendly couples, and two boys who ran a farm near by, invited them to a small party on Saturday night at 8.30, received their acceptance gratefully, and only realized on turning into his own drive-gate that he had not yet heard whether Niece Lucia would be coming or not. His distress was great ; he failed to imagine what he could possibly do with all these people and no Niece Lucia. He was forced to confess his impetuous folly to Eliza, who was not comforting. She said that it would be a little awkward, but no doubt he would manage quite well, and was anxious to show him how the freezer worked, in which he was too wrought up to take the faintest interest.

He was about to send a frantic second telegram when the 'phone bell rang and the operator read in a businesslike voice :

Aren't you a perfect lamb to suggest it. Rather. Both.

There were nine days to the day of the party. During the week-end Mr. Buffum allowed his mind quietly to play with every aspect of the coming event in the most elderly and sensible manner, alone. There was no need for undue excitement. A few friends were coming to a small festivity, a pleasant and ordinary

little affair which must on no account be pretentious. They would arrive about 8.30 ; he would greet them with a glass of Vermouth, flavoured with gin—(Gin and It, he believed Niece called it). They would dance for an hour or two, partake of some light refreshment, dance a little more, and depart. It was all quite simple and straightforward ; his mind, in happy contemplation of the event still distant, dismissed fuss and bother and excitement as foolish and unnecessary. What did it matter that it happened to be the first proper party he had ever given, when a little party was, after all, such a simple business ?

Moreover, he instantly knew what he was going to give Niece Lucia, and on Monday or Tuesday he would go to London and find it ; the most absurd, useless and delightful gaud, the name of which he did not know ; a sort of instep garter of glittering paste, with a pair of shoes without straps, for these funny foot bracelets could only be worn with strapless shoes. And he would give her them at the party itself—a delicious little surprise. Their presentation immediately became the main feature of the evening, and grew more so, when on Monday he found an exquisite pair at the third jeweller's he called at in Bond Street.

On Tuesday the mischief began—with Monnie's suggestion that they ought to have fireworks ; rockets and Roman candles, catherine wheels, squibs, coloured lights and crackers. He would gladly arrange it all and let them off, say, just before supper. The wild suggestion was, of course, immediately quenched, but it opened a door to aggravating thought ; that the party, though it must not on any account be pretentious, must be a success. People must enjoy themselves. An awful unknown factor was introduced. What did they enjoy ? Why should they enjoy

themselves ? He could see no reason why they should. It would be far better if they stopped quietly at home. Perhaps they shared Monnie's strange passion for fireworks. . . . It would be sure to rain. Coming out on a wet night, and going home on a wet night, while he remained comfortably in the dry. He could imagine few things more penitential—when he enjoyed sitting peacefully by the fire with a book, listening to the rain and the wind outside. . . . Fancy being tricked into this insanity by Monnie's wish to let off fireworks. He ought to have known better. Would the men dress ? He had not mentioned the matter. It was the sort of thing that was taken for granted, one way or the other, in circles with a distinct outline ; definitely high or definitely low, not feebly nondescript like his own. This horrible party glared like a ferocious spotlight on the privacies of his life.

As the days passed the atmosphere of his quiet home slowly became tense and thick with mystery and preparation and plan. Mr. Buffum experienced the odd sensation of being wound up a turn or two more tightly than was safe and many turns more tightly than was agreeable.

It was not wholly Monnie's fault, though the infection of his excitement was partly responsible. The boy relinquished the idea of fireworks, only to adhere like a postage-stamp to the necessity of Chinese lanterns. What party could possibly be a success without Chinese lanterns ? Mr. Buffum could find no answer, any more than he could find a reason for the boy's conviction. So he remained speechless.

" Well, then ! " Monnie charged his speechlessness and won. Certainty routed doubt. Mr. Buffum drove into Worthing, sitting meekly by the side of his conqueror, and purchased one dozen Chinese lanterns of

various sizes. Henceforth it became a fact beyond dispute in Mr. Buffum's mind that a party was no party without Chinese lanterns and ice-cream.

On Friday morning, after breakfast, he found Eliza and Monnie's father in solemn conference in the drawing-room.

"We were discussing how we could make more room for the dance," Eliza informed him.

"Well, you know," Mr. Buffum hastily demurred, "it's not really a *dance*. It's only the merest little party."

Monnie's father eyed him severely from under thick eyebrows, and wasted no word upon him. Monnie's mother, who came in every morning to work in the house, joined them. A committee, a quorum quite, and all three stared at the room.

"At best, it's none too large," Monnie's father announced.

The room shrank to pitiful proportions in Mr. Buffum's eye. And there were countless details to be thought of: far too many. It had never occurred to him that the entire room should be re-arranged.

"We'll give the floor a good polish this morning, and do it with French chalk."

Monnie's mother spoke to Eliza.

"I'd never thought of that!" Mr. Buffum exclaimed, and owned to himself that his mind had been mostly concentrated upon the presentation of the instep bracelets to Niece Lucia, which, properly speaking, had very little to do with the party, or at any rate the necessary arrangements for the party.

Mr. Monnie had often spoken to the Gov'nor about going into the village in dirty shoes; he had a high standard for the honour of the house with regard to the polish on shoes and other matters. He scoffed at the Gov'nor's suggestion that Monnie might take on boot-

cleaning, treating it as the frailest excuse for escape from supervision. " A nice mess the two of you would make of it ! " was his gruff comment, which made Mr. Buffum sense competition for a privilege rather than relief from a menial job.

But whenever the *honour of the house* was concerned, Mr. Buffum felt remiss, even with Monnie, who had it badly ; it must be left in other hands. So now at this committee-like gathering he felt uneasy and out of place and quietly slipped away—to encounter Monnie, peering in at the front door, hammer in hand, eager to have a go at the Chinese lanterns. They were to be hung in the House Place, the low-beamed living-room of the cottage on to which Mr. Buffum had built ; so at least Monnie had decided. The people would sit in there and eat ice-cream.

" But suppose they won't ? " Mr. Buffum faltered.

" Won't ! Won't what ? " asked Monnie.

" Won't sit here."

" You'll have to make 'em."

" This old chimney smokes," Mr. Buffum expostulated.

" We're going to put the big stove there," Monnie declared, pointing.

Mr. Buffum wandered out into the garden. The whole thing was getting far out of his modest range. Monnie had better join the committee meeting in the drawing-room. The house apparently was to be transformed. Out through the window came Monnie's loud asseveration : " The Gov'nor said I could put up the Chinese lanterns."

Mr. Buffum hastened his step ; it might be a pardonable inference, but he remembered saying nothing of the kind. Everything pointed to a pleasant stroll away from the harassing vicinity of the house.

But he had not gone far when he quickly returned, all of a bustle, all of a tremble. He had neglected to consider the question of drink at supper ; he had not sufficient cigarettes . . . these silly Chinese lanterns had put everything out of his head. Friday—it was too late to order wine properly from London.

" Come along, Monnie," he called in a peremptory voice. " Get the car out. We must go into the village at once."

He did not hear Mr. Monnie chuckle to the dames of the committee : " The old chap's in some bloomin' stew ! Not him ! " He only heard the happy laughter of the committee, which helped to soothe his troubled mind with the thought : " Well, at any rate *they* seem to be liking it ! "

Mr. Buffum had no conception how the white wine from Algeria reached the village emporium, but he knew that with siphons of soda it was the drink he wanted, pleasant and refreshing ; bottled beer would be rather low ; champagne would be pretentious. On this, no argument would have taken effect ; he felt about it in the same way as Monnie felt about Chinese lanterns, though if he had trusted himself, like Monnie, he would really have preferred to make a Cup.

But he did not trust himself like Monnie, and as the day of the party drew nearer he trusted himself less and less. It was one thing to telephone on the spur of the last moment to the nice friendly Ropers or the nice friendly Barlows, or even the boys at the farm : " My niece is here, won't you run round ; we might dance a little perhaps." It was a totally different thing to invite them all together, nine days in advance, to a proper party, the success of which depended wholly, of course, upon the host, namely

himself. It was as though his house was being strenuously transformed into a stage (with footlights), on which he was doomed to play the chief part. Worse than that. He could at any rate become word perfect in a part; in this show the unforeseen was bound to happen. It was improvisation from start to finish. He did not even know who would be the first to arrive.

When Mr. Buffum heard that Niece Lucia and Miss Marion would not be coming until 6.30, he very nearly cancelled the whole thing. Then, too, he was incautious enough to show Monnie his present for Niece on Saturday morning, and tell him of the possible little ceremony of presentation. Monnie leapt at the idea; the ceremony grew ever more elaborate in his fertile mind, until eventually Miss Lucia sat enthroned, the page brought in the jewels to the sound of trumpets (Dad on the cornet) on a scarlet cushion, the Gov'nor, kneeling, buckled them on her queenly feet. . . . To hear his own absurd little private dream shouted thus on the house-tops by this unblushing boy was most painful to Mr. Buffum; it made him feel both silly and incompetent; silly to have thought of it at all; incompetent to feel a sinking in the stomach at the mere thought of doing it. And yet to know that from his point of view the whole party would be a failure if he didn't. Oh! Anyhow, the party would be a failure.

He was so sure of it that by the time the girls arrived (late, of course) he met them with quiet resignation—with the set demeanour with which guests are welcomed to a funeral, and they were too hurried and excited to notice it.

On the gramophone he placed mournfully a half-sheet of note-paper on which he had written the order of service, the list of dance records, that is. He would

see the thing through somehow. After all, what did it matter if he made a fool of himself? It wouldn't be the first time; it wouldn't be the last. Of course, he shouldn't have dreamed of giving a party. He hadn't wanted to, he'd been pushed into it by others. Well, it would not last for ever; in a few hours the worst would be over.

"Come what, come may,
Time and the hour run through the roughest day."

The dear girls' delighted chatter at the light meal they were late for made him feel worse, not better. *Such a heavenly plan!* Was it! *So like him to have thought of it!* Like him, forsooth. *Fancy, Chinese lanterns in the House Place!* Fancy, indeed! *And ice-cream, too, and all that floor-space made for dancing.* . . . Mr. Buffum could not help his sour and gloomy feelings, though he disliked harbouring them. Nor did he like taking credit due to others, though he could not at that moment disabuse them. Least of all did he like his inability to mention that Monnie was going to act as page-boy, for he was aware of being ashamed of his small henchman, and would much prefer him to be going sensibly to bed rather than to be playing the little donkey, dressed up in buttons and white cotton gloves. His own weakness was responsible for this idiocy. He felt about Monnie now much the same as he had felt about a velveteen suit which his mother had wanted him to wear at his preparatory school. Monnie was as nice as the velveteen suit was pretty, but would the others understand?

Mr. Buffum's despair touched bottom when the first knock was heard. He had not been at the cottage during many rehearsals of announcement. He waited breathless with anxiety during interminable moments while coats and cloaks were being removed. The

door opened, an unrecognizably brushed, beautiful and shining Monnie stiffly appeared and announced in a voice that hardly wavered :

" Colonel and Mrs. Barlow."

Surprise keyed Mr. Buffum up like the perfect lead of a great actor, and pleasure too. Niece Lucia and Miss Marion obviously understood at once. Good time to hand round *Gins and Its* ; another knock.

" Mr., Mrs. and Miss Roper," without a quaver in his voice this time. And the boys from the farm came last, as Mr. Buffum hoped they would. What they had said to Monnie outside was unknown, but stiff solemnity had given place to a grin so wide that had their names been less familiar they would have been difficult to catch.

The sun can burst out from behind black banks of cloud and scatter them. Perhaps preliminary toe-chilling hesitation increases the pleasure of the man when he is swimming. Perhaps the nine days' wait—nine days' cumulative excitement suppressed now rose and broke and carried Mr. Buffum along like a tidal wave. . . .

Mr. Buffum forgot himself, forgot his age, forgot his awful position as host, forgot his shyness and incompetence, first in pleasure at the apparition and performance of young Monnie, then in the sheer delight of dancing, as he led off Mrs. Barlow to the gay strains of *Annabel Lee* (" Who is marvellous ? Who is wonderful ? "), serenely aware that his little cherished plan of having Miss Marion as partner for his favourite waltz *Always* could not be thwarted. *Always* was third on his list. Miss Marion must with quite ceremonial propriety be his third partner. The room was a perfect size for five couples, the floor had rubbed up to a surprising polish. He had never realized before how

well Mrs. Roper danced—as she answered in his arms to a romping tune from *Sonnie*. Niece put the records on with swift precision. So dear of her, never had to be asked even . . . with a girl like Lucia to help. . . . And every one—he couldn't help noticing—was in it, without any terrible frigid wait. . . . Without any hurry, but without the waste of a single moment of the tune, he stepped up to Miss Marion for *Always*, and, what was for Mr. Buffum almost a novel experience, forgot to question whether a man of his age and upbringing had a right to be so drowned in happiness. And that blessed niece of his called out, "Far too short. Same partners," without even looking at him, and off they went again in dreamy silence.

Little Miss Roper was a darling child. Mr. Buffum liked her shyness in dancing with him, liked putting her at her ease, liked to feel her dancing better and better, liked her gasped "Thank you!" at the end. And when he at length danced with Niece Lucia it was good to hear whispered as they moved in such delightful proximity: "You are a marvel, Old Man! I've never known—a dance—start so bang off. How do you—manage it?"

Mr. Buffum could not explain what a complete duffer he was; there was no need to explain how others had done it all; what two such girls as Niece Lucia and Miss Marion brought with them; how Monnie's keenness glowed in the background. . . . Mr. Buffum knew it all with happy complete awareness and gave himself up to enjoyment. But he said nothing, he held her closer, his smile widened. And she never even dreamed of expecting any little present. . . . So many girls would play up to old Uncle for what they could get, but Niece Lucia . . . why, to have

shabby thoughts of anyone with Niece Lucia in his arms seemed meagre and profane.

By a happy coincidence the next record was *Looking at the world through rose-coloured glasses.*

And so it went on, till the troubled, anxious face of Monnie peered in at a tune's end, and a hoarsely whispered stern " Gov'nor " called him out, to see the effect of the Chinese lanterns, lighted. The beamed House Place, through which the party must pass to the dining-room, looked pretty and strange as a room in a play, and in it the full committee, most eager and conspiratorial, like stage managers and hands before the curtain rises on the scene, were assembled. Monnie's father had drawn the corks from the bottles which Monnie's mother had swathed in white napkins. All arrangements were shown the Governor with eager solemnity.

" There'll be plenty of ice-cream ; it's turned out beautiful," Eliza announced.

" You've got to make 'em eat it in the House Place," hissed Monnie.

" Two more dances, then supper," Eliza (chief prompter) continued.

" You must get back now," Monnie's father insisted.

And back Mr. Buffum went, keen as Monnie, not doubting at all where the inspiration of the party lay.

At supper Monnie was immense. He started handing sandwiches immediately, long before the last couple had reached the dining-room. He wanted to do *all* the waiting. The only drawback was that he wanted the sandwiches finished before the cakes were even cut. Everything must be eaten to the last crumb. He was teased, he was joked at, but he was too busy and intent to heed jokes or teasing. Mr.

Buffum heard him whisper to Niece, "I say, Miss Lucia, there's ice-cream afterwards. You've got to make 'em eat it in the House Place." Mr. Buffum had one for himself a moment afterwards, as he was cutting a chocolate cake, for Monnie whispered violently in his ear, "That garter thing. Aren't you going to give it, then?"

That now seemed quite impossible to Mr. Buffum, but it spurred him to stop the hubbub of glad chatter and propose Niece Lucia's health, which was drunk with acclamation.

But people were ceasing to eat. Cigarettes were being lighted. Monnie grew anxious. The Governor refused to notice his nods and hints. The ice-cream, he knew, was already served in little glass saucers waiting on the kitchen table. Still the Governor smiled and talked. Monnie's patience gave out; he made a loud announcement: "There's ice-cream—now—please to be eaten in the House Place."

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Buffum. "That's most important."

The guests wandered into the House Place; slowly, first one, then another, sat down. At length they were all grouped among the Chinese lanterns. And Mr. Buffum found that people in their queer light took on a slight but pleasant difference, as he talked to them, just as the beamed room in which they hung was the same yet not the same.

Monnie informed his special friends—little Miss Roper, the boys from the farm, and of course Miss Lucia and Miss Marion—that there were second goes of ice-cream.

"But we must dance," cried Mr. Buffum, asserting himself.

"We'll come and sit out," Lucia put an arm round

Monnie to say—and her uncle noticed the gesture and said, "There now," to himself, as though he liked reasons for his love of Niece.

Oddly enough, his total inability to cope with the formal presentation did not depress Mr. Buffum, as might have been expected; on the contrary, it seemed to add to the zest of his enjoyment for what was within his capacity. He had the huge satisfaction of independence, for now he was a boy, without the dreadful encumbrance of someone standing over him with an awful "*you must*" upon his lips. In consequence, he felt as the evening proceeded, in his own modest way, quite reckless and abandoned, and took (without any snatching) every opportunity of dancing with Miss Marion, even on one or two occasions making the opportunity.

The evening was an undoubted success. "Oh, just one more! Just one more!" It was nearly two when the last guest went.

The Chinese lanterns dangled lightless in the House Place, where Eliza had left the usual small lamp burning before retiring. Mr. Buffum smoked and talked happily for ten minutes or so in the bare drawing-room, with Niece Lucia and Miss Marion. At length he wished them good night and saw them depart upstairs, smiling over what they assured him was one of the jolliest evenings they had ever spent.

Mr. Buffum went the round of the house, bolting windows, locking doors, putting out lights. In a dark corner of the House Place he came upon Monnie, asleep in a large chair.

Mr. Buffum gently woke him, and lighted the candle in his storm lantern, wondering how the boy had come to be overlooked. He saw the sleepy child back to the cottage.

" Your party was a great success, Monnie. No one was bored."

" Lots more ice-cream not ate," the boy grumbled.

Mr. Buffum steered him, a hand on his shoulder, along dark garden paths, blacker outside the circle of light thrown by the lantern. Every now and then Monnie sleepily stumbled.

" Did you give them garter things ? " he mumbled. Mr. Buffum hoped he was talking in his sleep and said nothing.

" Did you give them garter things ? " he repeated.

There was a painful pause. They were nearing the cottage.

" What will your Mum and Dad say ? You being so late ? "

The back door was unlocked. Mr. Buffum opened it, holding up the lantern for the boy to see his way through the kitchen. By the far door he turned and asked once more with drowsy insistence : " Did you give them garter things ? "

Mr. Buffum turned, and closing the cottage door carefully, walked back to the house through the dark garden, smiling.

CHAPTER VII

MR. BUFFUM BUYS A NEW CAR

MR. BUFFUM was driving, without his handy lad, Monnie, alone to Worthing, when suddenly he heard an ominous crack, startling as the crack of a lamp-glass which an ominous silence followed. The engine had stopped. The song is ended, but the melody lingers on : and the car sped along the level until Mr. Buffum applied the brakes and drew up cautiously by the side of the road, pleased at his foresight.

Then one thought and one only filled his mind and all his consciousness : the wish, the immense wish, that Monnie was with him.

Monnie would have risen to the occasion as to an adventure. But this was the sort of adventure which Mr. Buffum had himself long and thoroughly outgrown.

He pulled out his cigarette-case and thoughtfully lighted a cigarette. People would think that he had paused to admire the view. An A.A. man might pass on his bicycle. He ought to know what had happened : he knew only that he had not the remotest notion. But he tried to look upon the bright side. It was not raining : it was a lovely spot to stop in : he had a comfortable seat in which to sit and to smoke and to admire the view. He hesitated to press the self-starter, anxious not to make bad worse by injudicious experiment. He disliked amateur assistance, however kindly ; it was apt to be rash in method and loquacious in question.

No A.A. man appeared: his pensive cigarette was burning short. Something must be done. He boldly pressed the self-starter, but heard only a light whirr, meaningless and disconnected as some bright women's talk. He got out, opened the bonnet, and looked wisely and vacantly at what he could see of the engine. Plenty of juice: that he knew for certain. It all looked just as complicated and inexplicable as ever. The marvel really was that it should ever propel him happily along the roads: not that it should decline to do so. For Mr. Buffum's awe at the intricacies of an engine had increased with use.

His general experience of life told him that in any given emergency there was usually one correct course of action and countless wrong ones. He sat and waited hopefully for the one correct course to emerge. He yearned for the reassuring presence of Monnie as a lost child for its parent. In the near-by village there would surely be a telephone.

A very few steps away from the car along the road gave Mr. Buffum the comfortable sense of being a mere pedestrian—a rôle he was able to fill with assurance; he was no longer a motorist in difficulties—a rôle too conspicuous to be pleasant for a man of his retiring nature.

It was an agreeably fine morning and Mr. Buffum enjoyed the half-mile's walk into the village; an approach he always felt to be delightful. He found the 'phone without difficulty, and at the other end Monnie was fetched without much delay, who, panting and excited, pressed eagerly for precise details. A snap, going at twenty-eight—the engine stopped . . . A sound, half whistle, half sigh, greeted this information.

"I'll come with Mr. Charman: we may have to tow her home!"

Mr. Charman kept a garage in their village : he had done many jobs for Mr. Buffum, but the more important jobs, such as decarbonization, had been done by Mr. Thomas, who kept a larger garage in Worthing. Now Mr. Charman had, a few weeks back, made an alarming report upon Mr. Buffum's car : he had found a crack in the engine frame, which might widen : a flaw in the back axle : and unsoundness in the springs.

When Mr. Buffum, much distressed, had urged for a definite pronouncement to his simple question, is she unsafe to drive ?—he had been met with uncertainty and hesitation—she might last a month or two, a year or two, she might conk out to-morrow. For some days after this sad report he had driven with extreme caution, uncertain which minute would be the next. Then he had spoken to Mr. Thomas, who laughed and said : " Oh, she's every bit as good as when you had her : these old buses run for years, you know."

He had said to Mr. Thomas : " Well, if you see a coupé, more shut in, not too expensive, you would take this in part exchange . . . ? "

" Certainly, certainly ! " cried Mr. Thomas. " They are always coming my way. Why, only yesterday, the very thing . . ."

Mr. Buffum thought of this with some dismay as he walked slowly back to the dear derelict, his steps involuntarily slowing as he approached her : not that he was really ashamed of a valued friend now that she was in trouble : he was not paltry enough for that. He remained, however, at a diffident distance from the car, leaning on a gate, within view, contemplating the scenery, pondering on the hopeless aspect of a car that will not move, waiting for Monnie, to whom he gave a full hour at least.

He saw, out of the corner of his eye, an A.A. man

pause by the car. He felt guilty and deceitful at continuing to admire the peaceful prospect, but he could not bring himself to exhibit his ignorance before a stranger.

The A.A. man rode on:

"All right, sir?" he called out.

"Quite, thank you!" Mr. Buffum smiled back, as at a kind inquiry after health.

Eleven-forty-five. He was doing well. He had escaped all embarrassing attention so far. Why should he not stroll along for a glass of beer at the inn? A capital idea. He was back again at his convenient gate by twelve-fifteen, refreshed and fortified with a good pint, and at any moment now Monnie might arrive with familiar helpers.

Somehow Mr. Buffum felt that he ought, if he were a right-minded motorist, to be grovelling under the car, black with oil, wet with sweat, full of zest and purpose: he ought not to be thus quietly enjoying an enforced rest by the roadside: it was feeble and undignified, he was sure.

An eager shout from an ancient Ford disturbed his meditations. Mr. Charman and his mechanic were there, and Monnie. Mr. Buffum pointed and walked towards the dear derelict. The others were on her like terriers at a rat-hole. Solemn head-wags followed Bill the mechanic's effort to crank her up.

"There was a loud snap and the engine stopped," said Mr. Buffum, anxious to exculpate himself, "while she was travelling at twenty-eight miles an hour."

The sad verdict was pronounced, almost at once: "Something radically wrong! We'll have to give you a tow home."

The ancient Ford was twiddled with absurd ease (almost disrespectful, Mr. Buffum thought, considering

her obvious age) into place before the dear derelict, a towing rope was speedily attached, while instructions were given to Mr. Buffum as to the manner of steering a towed car : which Monnie took in with open mouth, and to Monnie Mr. Buffum tacitly and gladly resigned the driver's seat, disliking novelty of experience as profoundly as the boy welcomed it.

It is not a joyful business being towed, unless, like Monnie, it is your only chance of holding the wheel on the open road. The sympathy noticeable in the glances of those passing in untowed cars, though it may not be openly derisive, hardly seems wholly pure.

The eight-mile drive to Mr. Charman's garage was all too long for Mr. Buffum and all too short for Monnie. On arrival Mr. Charman jovially announced that they would inspect the damage after dinner and let Mr. Buffum know, adding, much to his bewilderment, " She mayn't be worth repairing," and kindly bidding Bill drive them the mile home in the ancient Ford.

There followed a period of perplexity such as Mr. Buffum had never before in his life experienced.

It began with Mr. Thomas ringing him up on the telephone, full of solicitude about the accident of which he had been told. Mr. Buffum at first was pleased and grateful : it seemed friendly and nice of Mr. Thomas, who was a comparative stranger, to take such an interest. He almost said so in as many words : indeed he was choosing them in his mind when the conversation took a horrid turn—" I shall probably have to fetch the car here : but of course my man will bring tools up : the trouble might be slighter than we think."

Mr. Thomas was a ready talker and his voice flowed happily on, so that Mr. Buffum hadn't the heart to break the flow and the facts to him immediately.

But at length he blurted out the guilty announcement: "The car's at Charman's garage in the village, you know."

"I did not know. How should I?"

No one could see the drawn uneasy smile on Mr. Buffum's face. "I don't know how you could possibly know of the breakdown," murmured Mr. Buffum in tones that should have mollified a dragon.

"Two men saw you being towed home."

There was a silence. Mr. Buffum was unable to confess to his yearning for the presence of Monnie.

"Of course you understand the position. Don't think I'm trying to snatch a job. I've got far more than I can comfortably do. Indeed my men work till eleven at night and we've had to turn away countless jobs with far more profit to them than—well, your car's not exactly new. But I am always anxious to oblige customers and I've got my hand on the very thing, as you spoke to me of a small coupé—but how can I possibly tell what to do with regard to part exchange if your car is in the hands of another man?"

There was an awkward silence. Then in gentler tones Mr. Thomas said: "Perhaps if you were to dispose of her privately in your neighbourhood you would get better terms." Thankful for the fading crossness, Mr. Buffum hastily agreed, then added: "Of course: I don't yet know what's wrong with her."

There followed a fluent discourse on Mr. Thomas's method of conducting business wholly in the interest of his clients, unlike many who were out for immediate profit, and who were often most unscrupulous in attaining their end. Many telling instances were given. Mr. Buffum became anxious only for the end of the conversation, which at length came; and he retired, a

much-troubled, much-bewildered man, to his chair by the fire for rest.

He had time to fill a pipe before the 'phone bell rang again. It was Mr. Charman who announced : " We've found your trouble. The timing wheels are broken."

" Oh ! " said Mr. Buffum, and waited for further particulars.

" I say the timing wheels are broken."

" Ah ! " said Mr. Buffum, and seeing Monnie through the window by which the telephone stood, frantically beckoned for him to come.

" It's Mr. Charman," he informed the boy. " He says the timing wheels are broken. You speak."

" What's that mean ? " shouted Monnie, as though he felt his voice must reach Mr. Charman in the village unaided by wire. Mr. Buffum stood anxiously by the hall door, feeling guilty at backing out of a difficulty. He watched the boy's eager anxious face and was so absorbed by the sight of its troubled intensity that he did not hear, as he would otherwise have done, the sound of approaching footsteps on the brick pavement outside.

The rapping on the door made him jump. He opened the door. There stood Captain Jackson, the admired of Monnie, as he had once sat in a racing car at Brooklands. Mr. Buffum stepped out on the bricks with his visitor, not to disturb the 'phone conversation upon which his fate hung.

Captain Jackson had heard of Mr. Buffum's trouble with the car, and instantly rallied round to help with his experience. Mr. Buffum was so much touched by the kindness that his consuming desire to be let alone seemed harsh and ungrateful. Captain Jackson had a bright and forceful manner, which Mr. Buffum felt he was horrid to hate. He knew his own mind, too,

and had decided to drive Mr. Buffum that afternoon into Horsham and possibly on to Dorking to garages where he was quite at home, and fix his friend up with another car immediately. It would simply be pouring money down the drain to spend it on repairing that old bus.

His words did not rouse that sweet reasonableness with which Mr. Buffum liked to receive the well-meant opinions of others. On the contrary, he knew that the only car he ever would or ever could drive was that same contemptible old bus, his proved friend, his loved niece's exquisite gift. Quite a little storm began to rage in his mind, and might have burst on Captain Jackson, had not Monnie rushed out and attention to an incoherent outpouring distracted Mr. Buffum from his wrath. He gathered that repairs would cost anything up to ten pounds, always supposing the part wanted for so out-of-date a car could be obtained at all. Captain Jackson became voluble and insistent, and from the fog of bewilderment in Mr. Buffum's mind emerged one certainty only—that of Monnie's longing for a drive in Captain Jackson's Bentley. This weighed with him far more than it should. He felt both cunning and deceitful in accepting Captain Jackson's offer for such a reason, as he knew quite well that he had no intention whatever of buying a car under the good Captain's auspices.

The result of the drive was a huge success from Monnie's point of view: he had passionately appreciated every snappy change of gear, every swift getaway. From Mr. Buffum's point of view, however, the drive's success was qualified. He found himself involved with two more garages, and another kind persistent friend urging him to make up his mind, which in a state of complete ignorance is never easy.

He felt as though unseen hooks had been fastened deftly into him and that he was being pulled in various directions by strong unseen hands.

He knew all about his bicycle—he eyed it wistfully as it leaned sadly against the wall—rusted, flat-tyred, disused, rejected. Why had he ever allowed himself to be bitten by the mad motor-craze? He would never be a real motorist: he could never again ride his bicycle with satisfaction, a bicycle that had yielded him such loyal service for so many years. In a really good car he could get to London well under the two hours. Fob off these confounded made-overs. . . . He'd show them . . . and make an exhibition of himself flaunting in a grand car at his age, when he ought to be pleased to have a bicycle to ride and the strength of limb to ride it. Far healthier, too, than riding in a mechanically propelled vehicle. There was indeed something distinguished, aristocratic even, in these days when every tradesman owned his car, in pedalling quietly along on his unhurrying way. It might be a little sweaty perhaps on a warm day, and not very good for the trousers of his blue serge suit, but a man should move within his own orbit, a man should have a soul above comfort and appearance, a man should . . .

No wonder, with such high thoughts uplifting him, Mr. Buffum should utter a deep sigh of genuine regret that never under any circumstances could he take to a bicycle again. He'd rather—hang it!—walk, or—he gave a bitter laugh—propel himself about like a child of one.

But he was still in the thick of his trouble, which daily, almost hourly, increased. It was, of course, his own fault entirely; and he was well aware of it. He asked for advice, and when a man asks for that commodity he invariably gets it.

"Now tell me, what would you do in my case?" he said to Mr. Charman with touching frankness. "Knowing nothing about cars, I find it difficult to make up my own mind as to what is the best course to take."

Mr. Charman, a little irritated as Mr. Buffum had allowed Mr. Thomas to tow the dear derelict to his garage, looked him up and down and answered:

"A Weedon would suit you down to the ground."

Monnie, who was with Mr. Buffum, uttered a yell of rage, and the boy's hoarse cry, added to Mr. Charman's manner, hurt Mr. Buffum like a subtle insult, though the name Weedon conveyed as little to his intelligence as did Monnie's bitter remark, when he had recovered from the shock: "Our dog's well trained."

Mr. Buffum made the mistake of replying not to the words spoken, but to the crossness behind them. He said:

"I really thought you meant it wasn't worth your while to waste time on my old car."

At which Mr. Charman merely snorted.

Mr. Buffum was grieved to realize that he was offending others without gaining any help for himself.

The phone bell never ceased to ring, and when he went out for a long walk to avoid its painful clamour, he returned to find, in kind Eliza's illegible scrawl, a list of people for him—please to ring up immediately: and that list lengthened.

One man pointed out that "running in" a new car was not a novice's job, and insisted on the marvellous value to be obtained by a man in the know among, say, shop-soiled vehicles: the next man raised his eyebrows merely in contemptuous comment at such optimism. One man insisted that it was better to buy a first-class make, however ancient, than a cheap

car, however new. Each as he spoke convinced Mr. Buffum's ignorance, until the conviction was upset like a ninepin by the next speaker.

Mr. Buffum became desperate, as the number of men to whom he became committed—*Leave yourself in my hands, old fellow, I'll fit you up all right*—increased in number. He seriously considered leaving the country and settling for good in the North of Scotland or the South of France. Anyhow, even if he ever got a car, there would be no garage within a radius of twenty miles to which he would have the face to take it for attention. And in his despair he bethought himself of Niece Lucia, who was really responsible for his distress. Who else had lured him from the narrow way? Who else had caused the repudiation of his bicycle? And he could no longer remain carless.

So he sent an urgent appeal for help to Niece Lucia, who swallowed her dinner, drove through the night, and came. She arrived soon after ten, and disappeared at once into the kitchen to mix an insidious drink called Egg Nogg which she declared she needed after her drive. She did not mention that it was a wonderful liberator of a harassed mind, and Mr. Buffum, touched by her instant response to his appeal, was glad to join her in what appeared to be an innocuous glass or two of milk in which an egg or two had been beaten up. He noticed a little something else about it; but had no idea with what American generosity this glaxo had been laced with his brandy and lashed with his rum; thus giving body and spirit to his joy in Niece's presence.

He began his tale of woe.

The wood fire before which they sat was bright and pleasant: the sight of Niece was delightful and reassuring. As the tale of woe proceeded, the difficulties

diminished and gave gradual place to a strange and growing elation which Mr. Buffum sought to quell by stating firmly that he would never buy an extravagant or costly car. There was nothing so vulgar as ostentation, was there? Niece Lucia, listening with bright-eyed attention, nodded immediate agreement. He went on, disposing lightly of every argument in favour of a made-over or makeshift car, while Niece Lucia waited until the flow stopped and Mr. Buffum in quite a different voice, low, distant and reflective, said:

"I wonder why that boy, Monnie, should have set his heart on a Planet Saloon."

He paused as though hoping for an opinion on the set of Monnie's heart: but getting none, he spread out his hands, and said, smiling:

"So you see I've not the least notion what to do or even what I want. I only know that I must have some sort of quiet, safe and inexpensive car. Having tasted blood . . ." He brooded mildly and stopped.

Niece felt her bright eye was reading Uncle too patently. She shielded her face from him and looked into the fire, controlling her voice to say with business-like precision:

"I know a wonderful old bus, a bargain, going for thirty-five pounds. A little shabby and out of date perhaps, but lots of go left in it, still. Lots."

"Ah," said Uncle sadly. "That sounds the very thing."

"What with the noise and vibration," she continued solemnly, "you really do know you are in a motor-car and not gliding along on your old bike like you do in these new-fangled silent things."

He looked at her questioningly, as his oracle turned a pensive face towards him and asked:

"Didn't you buy some Celanese at five shillings?"

Mr. Buffum jumped with guilty surprise at this reference to what had been lurking far back in his mind even before the dear derelict's demise and stammered: "Yes."

"They stand at about twenty-two now."

"I know," he faltered.

"How people can drive about in a car costing nearly three thousand pounds beats me. Just sheer abominable swank!" she meditated.

"Awful!" Mr. Buffum agreed. "Awful! Still, I think I might without extravagance go a little beyond the thirty-five-pound mark."

"Your Celanese, then, are worth about a thousand."

"£1,110 15*s.* 6*d.* to be exact."

Niece laughed inside herself and said with a solemnity which a less suspicious man might have found excessive: "I expect Monnie's so keen on Planets because he knows George is one of the main distributors. When George was here the two had many a heart-to-hearter on cars. But of course that mustn't influence you in any way."

"Are you,—forgive me, dear, if I intrude,—are you fond of George?"

"Yes, very," she answered with immediate candour, which left Mr. Buffum exactly where it found him—in complete doubt.

"As a matter of fact," he began with a plunge, "I rather like . . . that's to say . . ."

But he could not make his own fond confession. It seemed absurd, even wicked, that he should aspire to drive a Planet.

"Yes. I know you took to George," she covered his uneasiness by blandly saying.

"That eleven hundred pounds is simply a windfall,"

she went on. "Not capital. I should sell out. A car like a Planet is a safe investment."

"My dear child, you are not suggesting I should have a Planet! Me drive a Planet? Really . . ." He washed his hands and sat up to keep from trembling. To hear the suggestion, distinctly spoken, thrilled him, for he was himself genuinely unaware how much his heart was set on it: indeed, had been set on it after hearing the good George's quiet exposition of its beauties three solid months ago and longer. His diffidence stamped the wish as fantastic and impossible, and increased thereby its potency. Amazing Niece sat opposite to him and coolly described this fantastic impossibility as a safe investment.

"I say, you don't really mean . . ."

She appeared not to notice his excitement, though it electrified the room. She leaned forward and carefully filled his glass with the insidious Egg Nogg, which looked as innocent as stuff to fill an infant's bottle. He drank it smoothly down, though the hand that held the tumbler shook.

"Say eight hundred pounds for buying: that leaves a good three hundred pounds for expenses: tax, insurance, tyres, improvement to garage, and your real capital left untouched. I was afraid you might feel you must launch out and get an expensive car. Sheer madness. What's the time?"

"Ten minutes past eleven."

"I'll ring George up."

Mr. Buffum gasped, and moved his lips like a fish on grass. He would have collapsed, but the Egg Nogg sustained him. He rose from his chair.

"I'll send in those shares for the Bank to sell. It's no good wasting time."

The note was written, the envelope addressed and

sealed; when Mr. Buffum, walking on air, arrived with it in the hall to leave it for post, Niece was still talking on the phone.

So he grasped his Wanderer's Staff and hat and went out into the cool dark night, intent on a plan which, had he not been drunken with excitement even more than with Egg Nogg, he would have instantly dismissed, had it occurred to him, as childish and inconsiderate.

But now Mr. Buffum walked with firm footsteps towards the cottage, remembering that Monnie's room was on one side of the bungalow cottage, his parents' room on the other.

He climbed on to the window-sill of the bedroom: the window was open at the top, he pulled it further down and, pushing aside the loose curtain, peered over the window into the room. The foot of the bed lay under the window.

"Monnie!" he called out. "Monnie! Don't be frightened, my boy. It's only me. The Gov'nor."

No sound but deep regular breathing. He never thought for a moment how shameful it was to waken a sleeping child. He was liker Tom Sawyer than Augustus Buffum. He carefully lifted his long Wanderer's Staff over the glass window, and gently prodded the boy's body, repeating, "Don't be alarmed, my boy. It's only me, the Gov'nor."

At length Monnie awoke from his beauty sleep. He mumbled, "All right, coming," and, putting his legs out of bed, stood staring in a nightgown which reached his toes. "You! Lor'! 'Elp!"

"I say, Monnie. Yes. It's me. But I say. Listen. I had to tell you. Ssh! Don't make a sound. But we're going to have a Planet."

Monnie climbed on to the foot of the bed and, peer-

ing up into Mr. Buffum's face, whispered hoarsely: "Say that again!"

"We're going to have a Planet!"

"Christmas!" cried Monnie, tottering.

"No, now. Possibly to-morrow. Good night, my dear boy. Mind you go to sleep again at once. Don't tell anybody!"

And Mr. Buffum hurried back to Niece without another word.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. BUFFUM HAS AN ENCOUNTER WITH HYMEN

MR. BUFFUM was on the 'phone speaking to Niece Lucia. His face first beamed.

"Yes, dear, by all means, come."

His face then fell.

"But . . . er . . . but . . . er . . ."

His lips moved soundlessly together.

A cheery "Out with it, Old Man!" assailed his ear. He swallowed and enunciated distinctly, as though to suppress any ribald comment: "My friend Mr. Wagstaffe and his daughter Patty will be spending Saturday with me."

"Would you rather I didn't come?"

Niece was always so terribly direct.

"No, no!" said Mr. Buffum immediately. "Please come. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"You know quite well."

"Oh, I'll behave myself," she laughed.

"Now, you know that's not quite . . . not quite . . ."

"Oh, near as makes no matter, Old Man. Till Friday."

Mr. Buffum accepted it as an indubitable fact that Mr. Wagstaffe, his late partner in business and his oldest and best friend, being all that Mr. Buffum was not, was on that account worthy of much respect. Niece Lucia, with her flippant sense of truth, declared

him to be an infliction and the main cause of Uncle's early retirement from commercial circles.

They met at lunch on Saturday, and at lunch Niece Lucia concealed her feelings so well and behaved so beautifully that she won the loud approval of Mr. Wagstaffe and, alas! the confidence of his daughter: the last thing she desired. She heartily disliked Mr. Wagstaffe; his daughter . . . well, she ticked her off as girlish—a quality which should surely commend its owner, but didn't.

"She gasps and giggles. Oh, my dear, unspeakable . . . the clinging sort, bendy, puts on the weakling air, entwines and ingratiates and sticketh closer than a . . ." Here most naughtily yet most expressively she flicked with thumb and finger an imaginary something from her arm, shuddering.

It happened after lunch—in the drawing-room. Niece Lucia was fairly caught. She was thinking, "She reminds me of weed in a pond," when she found Patty Wagstaffe beside her, her arm in an affectionate clutch, and heard emitted between breathings of emotion:

"Oh, I *do* so like you, and I was so afraid of you, but not any more now. That *dear* Mr. Buffum . . . I must tell you. I know you'll help—but father is so ridiculous, and he's quite set his heart on me marrying him. You know what father is. He is so candid and impetuous: he says, 'I've always had to look after old Buffum; a good wife'd be the making of him, and you're the very one . . .' Isn't he too absurd!"

Niece Lucia sat slowly stiffening, more and more like wood. She was caught in clinging pond-weed: any moment she might be kissed. And she had quite thought girls like this had died out; were obsolete. They still existed. She was nonplussed. She sat

mumchance: slowly stiffening; and her hard arm was being kneaded by coaxing fingers:

"Oh, you're surprised! Uncles always seem so old, I know. And a girl like me!" Miss Wagstaffe cooed.

She was, in a way, hostess. The girl was her guest. You could not say to a guest: "You disgusting little beast!" Possibly the thing had feelings of its own; there was no knowing. Just the little cringy sort that might inveigle itself . . .

The first shock passed. It was no good working oneself up. She firmly undid the clinging fingers and rose to her feet.

"I'm afraid that I'm a bad person to confide in," she said. "I never know what to say. You don't smoke. No? I will."

Straight and slim and taut she stood, rising on her toes by the mantelpiece. Whatever she said would be misunderstood by this treacherous little wisp of insincerity: and if she spoke directly enough to make any misunderstanding impossible, she would be unpardonably rude.

"Father's too awful for words. This visit he's going to make . . . it's only to give me the chance to what he calls fix it up before he picks me up on his way back."

It was odiously taken for granted that, being a woman, Lucia perfectly understood what would happen, that she recognized the ease with which it could be made to happen: and being a woman, alas! she did recognize it all too well. Uncle was such a chivalrous, darling, old *idiot*: and the more she warned him, the more mulishly obstinate he would become.

Niece Lucia heard the Wedding March; saw the end of all good times with Uncle. No. It wasn't just selfishness, she furiously thought: this little beast

couldn't appreciate a pet guinea-pig, let alone a man like Uncle. He'd be wretched. And, oh, so easily anyone could play on his feelings! What chance had he against two such designing ones?

She heard the men coming.

"I love long walks," she forced herself brightly to say. "I'll see you at tea," she beamed, and made her escape, leaving, she felt, poor Uncle to his fate.

She heard words of ill-omen in Wagstaffe's loud voice:

"I've got to pay a sort of business visit in Angmering as I'm in the neighbourhood: you don't mind my leaving Patty with you, old chap? I'll call for her on the way back."

Such things boiled up in Niece Lucia to be said! The farther away she was, the better and the safer. A swift walk to the Downs was indicated . . . fresh air and an open view. And on her return, prettily staged, to greet her at the hall door perhaps, she'd see Patty twined like pond-weed on Uncle's arm and hear her breathy gasp of a voice say, girlishly: "Oh, darling, what *do* you think, he's asked me to marry him and we're engaged!"

"And she'll giggle . . . and I shall not be allowed to strangle her, offhand, forthwith and at once."

She set off walking at a great pace, determined to reach the top of the Downs, as though her actual sanity depended upon the very top being reached. But she had not been walking more than seven minutes before she stopped quite suddenly and turned sharply round. Her behaviour was quixotic.

Why should she leave the little wretch a clear field for her knavery? Her mere presence would suffice to thwart the horrid scheme. Of course, that kind of girl could only think she wanted to cling on to Uncle and his money. Her mind worked on those lines and

on no others. And the scheme was too simple with an unsuspecting lamb like Uncle. The girl had only to sit on his knee—she could picture the scene! (and vividly did). "Oh, I can't help it! I do so love you. Father is so harsh and doesn't understand, and you are so gentle—oh, don't think me too bold and awful. Really." And she'd put her arm round his neck, her cheek against his. . . . "And I'm so lonely and no one to love me and be gentle to me like you and understand me like you. Oh, couldn't you give me one kiss?"

Niece Lucia stamped her foot to stop these horrid imaginings. They were not kind to a sister-woman: they were not flattering to Mr. Buffum: but for neither of these noble reasons did she stamp to stop them; she stamped to stop them because they were all too deadly true to be tolerable.

She walked resolutely back at an even faster pace than that at which she had started out. She slammed behind her the small gate that led through a little wood to the garden. She passed by the drawing-room window and looked in, as she walked past on the grass. The fire blazed. By the light of the fire she saw that she was too late. The mischief was done. In fifteen minutes! Incredible. It was too late. Fool to have gone out! Coward to have left him! There the egregious Patty was on his knee, her weed-like arms entwined around his neck. Too bad. The little serpent.

Well, one thing was quite certain. She could not be civil to them at tea: would not join in at all the gloating aftermath. No need to make matters worse by rudeness she knew she could not bottle up. Poor Uncle would be certain, too, to think he was happy. She very nearly cried with vexation. And perhaps, people are after all so amazingly different, there might

be happiness for him . . . That thought really did bring tears to her eyes . . . The little mean clinging thing . . . Life was too difficult.

She paced away in the opposite direction and decided to pay a surprise call, to clinch at any rate the tea affair, if her luck and the people were in. Both were. And for two good hours she escaped from the looming cloud of event, owing to the distraction of behaving in the home of comparative strangers. She entered its looming blackness, however, as she made her sad way back to the house, where she had enjoyed so many happy times. With a new mistress all would be different

No Buick stood on the drive. They were gone. What had been left behind? There was no wind. It was very still. The stillness seemed ominous. She was deeply fond of Uncle. She realized now how terribly she would miss all the easy delicious fun of their relationship—and with that snaky little creature always odiously there, what would be left of it? Some people spread a sort of poison in which all gladness and all niceness withered.

She softly opened the hall door and went in. The house was silent. What a dear place it was! She softly and sadly climbed the stairs to her room. She sat down limply on her bed, too depressed to take off her things. The right sort might make things happier and nicer! Perhaps she *was* hard and unkind to that loathsome little beast! "Oh dear! If I've got to sort of smile with Uncle over his new-found joy! Old Idiot! Old Idd-dd-iot!"

She heard him moving about in his study. She listened intently. She heard him humming. She heard a book dropped; or a hand clapped . . . or a knee smacked. She heard him whistling, whistling loud

and whistling wrong notes. *Onward, Christian soldiers.* Curse it! He was in the seventh heaven. Fatuously got.

Well, as good first as last. May as well bite the bullet. Grasp the nettle. No good putting off the evil moment. She could say she was glad he was happy. So she was, of course, in a way. She must say she didn't very much like his sweet inamorata—yet, at any rate. That would be honest.

"SSSSS—wonderful! SSSSS—marvellous!" she bitterly hummed, as she tidied herself. Then pulled herself together and went into the study.

Mr. Buffum was radiant. There was a strange light in his eye as he hurried across the room to greet her, welcoming hands stretched out. It was really too much. He was such a complete old darling.

"My dearest girl!" he cried. "Now, where have you been?"

"I wanted a good walk."

His ear was quick to catch a note of distress in her voice. He suppressed his own high spirits: attentively he moved an easy chair nearer the fire: and with shy courtesy held up the cushion for the right place in the small of her back: handed her a cigarette, lighted a spill . . . she adored the deference he managed to convey by his little attentions. Then he sat unobtrusively down by her, with a sigh, as though of pleasure to be with her.

She put her hand on his knee. It was the most beastly shame. And to get all soppy as she was getting would not improve matters.

"If you want to know what, Old Man."

She suddenly stopped. He waited.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter," she said abruptly.

He gently suggested that anything troubling her mind did matter.

"It's nothing. Only if you want to know what's really spiteful, you'll get one nice girl's opinion of another . . ."

Mr. Buffum eyed her keenly over his glasses. The little lines round his eyes deepened in secret mirth.

"I am afraid a dear girl like Miss Patty is not quite your sort. It pleased me to see how delightful you were to my friends at lunch. All the more because . . ."

Oh! Law! Now it was coming. Now he'd beat delicately round the bush. Now in his quaint Victorian manner he'd break the glad tidings "she is to be something, ahem! more than a friend." She steeled herself to listen. She felt his eyes on her, but could not look at him. She waited. Nothing came. She turned to ask sharply:

"Because what?"

"Because of that."

"What?"

"Not liking them."

He'd funked it. Swerved away. She must still be waiting; worse than in a dentist's chair, tipped backwards with your mouth gagged, waiting.

"I am so happy."

Heavens, it was going to be bad!

"I have a surprise . . . a secret . . ."

She gripped the arms of her chair, steeling her nerves for the wrench. These pauses were dreadful to bear.

In a soft voice he spoke at last: "Can't you guess?"

"Perhaps I can. But for goodness sake have it out and tell me!"

"What would be the only thing that could gladden a nice man's heart?" he murmured. Her words to him on one occasion had stuck in his mind.

"Look here! It's not fair . . ." she burst out.

" There's nothing to be upset about, I assure you."

" Oh, very likely not. It'll be just the same when that little . . . Men have no sense, no delicacy, no vaguest decency of feeling."

Niece Lucia was losing control of herself.

" I thought it could not be for this week-end. To come this afternoon. With you in the house."

She swallowed with decision and managed to say in a firm voice which she intended to be kind and encouraging :

" Yes. Tell me all about Patty."

" Oh, ha ! Patty, yes. I was afraid you noticed something as you passed the drawing-room window. Poor child. Yes. She was feeling lonely, she said, and er . . . it was a little embarrassing. Her father thought . . . I'm afraid he rather domineers . . . it was very sweet of her to suggest it . . . a little trying . . . I took her for a drive in the Planet. You didn't suppose by any chance that I . . . er . . . was . . . as you might say . . . having any ? "

What a rush of relief !

Niece Lucia scrutinized his face. " Oh, you would, would you ! " she thought.

" I'm not sure, Uncle, whether I think you're a very nice man."

Some things—some feelings—perhaps, she might not be able to master, but she would rise from the dead to score off Uncle. That was quite certain. Her face grew long. She hummed a solemn tune. She surveyed him with the kind but disapproving scrutiny with which an elderly spinster might survey an erring boy caught kissing the pretty housemaid.

" Curious that men should always take that line. From Adam onwards. I could quite understand in a way . . ."

"My dear, I assure you . . ." he interrupted, but she continued:

"Though, of course, to take such immediate advantage of her father's—temporary absence—and with a girl so obviously trusting and feminine—not the adventurous kind of girl who can look after herself. But don't please think I care . . . it's not my business at all how you choose to behave in your own house to defenceless women . . ."

"My dear, I beg of you, you must really believe me . . ."

"Believe that a girl like Patty, a girl so innocent and confiding as Patty, climbed on to your knee and asked you to marry her. . . . I'll try and do anything to oblige you, dear Uncle. . . . Perhaps you'll ask me to believe that that Prince of Good Fellows, her father, told his dear obedient child to behave in this manner."

"I know it sounds a little strange," faltered Mr. Buffum.

Niece Lucia drew herself up demurely.

"To me you are just simply the bad lad of the village: and I shall feel it my duty to warn my artless young friends against your machinations. Host, too, in your own house. Getting Pa out of the way on a business errand, sending me out for a long walk. Oh, you ancient iniquity!"

She could keep it up no longer. Uncle's piteous face was one immense expostulation. She gave way to consuming, conquering laughter, through which Mr. Buffum made out the words, "I'll teach you to play tricks on me, Old Man!" To which in bewilderment he stammered, questioning:

"I beg your pardon?"

"Play tricks on me."

"Tricks? Ah well, yes. I noticed you pass the

window: and thought you might jump to your own conclusions. That's true. But to be serious, dear. I wish you to be serious, dear."

He took hold of her hands. "There might have been a time . . ." He let go her hands to smooth his brow. "I used to accept as a fact . . . before I knew . . . before you came into . . ."

"Go on, Old Man, tell me."

"That a wife was a sort of clinging responsibility, which I could never venture to assume . . . well now . . . a woman—oh, don't you think I shall ever approve of all your horrid modern ways of going on; I never shall!—but now I can imagine a woman having a life of her own, a world of her own . . . even possibly being in her own attractive way a friend, because she can be . . . well . . . herself . . . Miss Patty is the perfect clinging responsibility . . . and I'm very, very sorry for her. Now . . . Now. Sshh! I won't be led out of my elderly depth into importunate argument . . . My real secret's this . . . I've never in my life had champagne of my own in the house. But I've got some. Help me open my own first bottle. What? A good occasion. This evening. Now. Then finish it at supper. Eh?"

"Oh, Old Man! You did upset me, dear. I couldn't have borne it if you'd . . ."

"Ssshhh! Come along! Champagne . . ."

"I'm not so silly as you think. She told me she was going to . . . Hurrah! Patty as Patty can, she's missed the boat!"

CHAPTER IX

MR. BUFFUM DECIDES TO HAVE NO NONSENSE

MR. BUFFUM was very hurt to receive a curt telegram from Niece Lucia on the afternoon of a Friday in July, when he was expecting her for the week-end, to say that she was unavoidably prevented from coming. She might at least have 'phoned. No reason was given. These modern manners. . . . Some young man claimed her . . . might at least tell him . . . he'd mind in a way. But his minding would depend upon how her engagement caused her to treat him.

The curtness was quite unlike her. And no explanatory letter came. Oh, well, it had been very pleasant when it *had* suited her book to come. He was a foolish old man to have allowed it to mean so much to him : to have been lured, for an instant, from his own elderly ways. As a novelty he'd been some fun ; the novelty was wearing off.

On Saturday morning he overheard Eliza inform Monnie's mother that the Governor's harness didn't fit him : and he wished that people were not so horribly observant.

He passed the telephone in the hall and realized that it would be sensible to ring up Niece Lucia and ask her why she wasn't coming, if he wanted to know. " Sensible ! That ! " Something snorted within him. " And be snubbed for inquisitiveness about her affairs." No. No. He wagged a sagacious head.

He wandered, however, into the kitchen and told Eliza that he was upset at not hearing why Miss Lucia could not come.

Eliza pondered, looking at him.

"Something wrong, I'm afraid."

"Wrong! What could there be wrong?"

"I hope there's not, from my heart."

"Chance of a good time, more likely; you know . . . just wires to put me off . . . not that I mind . . . quite natural."

Mr. Buffum dried up under Eliza's unresponsive stare. She shook her head.

"Not Miss Lucia!" And repeated with a stern laugh, "Not Miss Lucia!" adding under her breath, "if I know a wart from a winkle, as you might say."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm inclined to agree with you," said Mr. Buffum, and wandered out of the kitchen, feeling both relieved and ashamed of himself.

He disliked ringing a person up, considerably more even than being rung up, especially on some subject other than the very simplest business. But he gave the trunk call at once, and waited a nerve-racking ten minutes for the call to be put through. At last it came, and, thank goodness, the line was clear.

"That you, dear? Uncle speaking."

"You lamb to ring me up!"

"Are you quite well?"

"Yes, rather. That's to say—oh yes!"

There was hesitation; then, too sudden brightness to be convincing. There was a moment's pause, during which he waited for Niece, who was always so direct, to make the running.

"Then why . . . I mean . . . as long as you're all right . . ." It was too difficult not to appear inquisi-

tive. He stopped, then after a painful little silence the too bright voice came :

" The fact is, the car's not running ; and I am a little under the weather, and . . ."

" Haven't you got some jolly plan on ? " he was emboldened to ask.

" Oh dear no ! I mean . . ." (There was a laugh Mr. Buffum did not like.) " Not particularly good company, that's really about all."

Mr. Buffum, at that, lost all diffidence, became quite all assurance.

" Good enough for me," he asserted.

" On the contrary, I shouldn't dream of shaking myself over you like a wet dog."

" It's a quarter past ten now. I shall be with you at 12.30. I should be glad if you would lunch with me and be driven down here." A pause. " Did you hear me, Lucia ? "

" Oh yes, I heard ! Thank you."

Deuce take it ! She was crying. He hung up the receiver, perturbed.

A drive to London was always a solemn affair with Monnie, with the prospect of eating his dinner in a real London garage, where he could talk with drivers and mechanics. This drive was more solemn than usual, for he sensed Mr. Buffum's anxiety and was afraid something must be very wrong indeed with Miss Lucia's car. It seemed incredible to his young mind that Mr. Buffum should have elicited no exact details of any kind. He feared the Governor never would learn the importance of these matters, and was shocked at his indifference.

Monnie was quite right. Mr. Buffum hardly gave the car a thought, except as a sign of Niece Lucia's state of mind. And his anxious thought took quickly on

from Niece Lucia to the manifold dangers for any girl, however confident and self-supporting and free-minded and modern, in a world of unscrupulous men. The ancient dangers. It was all very well to say a girl could look after herself. Could she? The balance was not fairly held. The woman always suffered.

Well, things were as they were. For better or for worse. You couldn't put the clock back. He wasn't her father or mother; he was spared the job of approving or disapproving. He could, perhaps, help.

Must parents approve or disapprove? He supposed they must, and was thankful that he was not a parent . . . approving—disapproving—ghastly inhuman business. Yet didn't parental authority build the very fabric of society? A hand touched his arm: "Steady, Gov'nor: it's a fairish sharp bend."

He slowed down and, no longer allowing his attention to wander from the road, reached the Westminster garage without mishap.

For all his extreme diffidence, Mr. Buffum, curiously enough, felt no awkwardness in approaching Niece Lucia, though he had never before thus taken the bull by the horns. He did not expect her for a moment to show obvious signs of grief or to confide in him; so he was not embarrassed or put out by her cheeriness during lunch.

He liked this chance of action on his own initiative: it seemed to clear his mind, so that he was able to state quite firmly at the end of lunch, and, as he hoped, quite clearly:

"I may disapprove of all modern ways of going on: I do. But you live in the world as it is, and I should like you to understand that if I can be of assistance in any difficulty or trouble, or . . . or scrape, it . . . it . . ." He became a little confused and finished tamely,

looking round for the waiter : " That's what I'm there for. Yes. Bill, please ! "

Monnie had no diffidence about probing ; he rushed straight at it with a happy beam as they drove from the garage to the flat : " Had to fetch you, then, Miss Lucia, this time. What's the matter with yours ? These sporty little buses are easy put out of order ; need neat handling."

His ribald spirits were quenched by her answer :

" I had a good offer and I've sold her. Tired of her, as a matter of fact."

" Go on ! " he gaped. " You never . . . I say, Gov'nor, did you hear . . ."

She interrupted him ; leaning across, she put a hand on Mr. Buffum's shoulder, to say in his ear : " I won't be five minutes packing, dear. Perhaps Monnie could come up and carry my suit-case down ? "

* * * * *

During the drive Mr. Buffum had his worst fears confirmed by Niece's silence and unresponsiveness to Monnie, who was anxious that the improvements in the Governor's driving should be appreciated, as a good master is anxious that a favourite pupil under inspection should appear at his best, and that that best should be noticed. Mr. Buffum's thought persisted that it was always the woman who suffered. It was never easy to be a woman ; but surely at no time in the history of the world was it quite so difficult to be a woman as it was to-day. All this surface freedom : yet always it was the woman who ran the greatest risk, the woman who suffered. And they were so confoundedly unkind to each other . . .

Thank goodness, he'd come and fetched her down. Supposing he had remained sulky and hurt.

They arrived in time for a late tea, after which Mr.

Buffum put on the gramophone a magnificent record—his latest acquisition—of a Brahms Symphony played by the Philadelphia orchestra.

This quiet Niece, this sad and solemn girl, was new to him. He liked the mood immensely. He felt in touch with something very deep and very human : and stepped softly, as it were, not to disturb it. So nice of her to feel she need make no pretence.

She marvelled at his total lack of fussy curiosity, and revelled in his kindness ; as though she needed, as we all do at times, her faith in human beings to be restored and he were restoring it. Her courage, too. The peacefulness of it !

" Do you read a lot ? " she suddenly asked, wondering where he got his queer understanding from.

And in that quiet mood he confessed that he was able to approach certain dead writers in their work far more closely than he could any living man in his flesh. " Not right, perhaps," he added, " but circumstance can be so prickly, you know, to a shy man : and in books we have them, at their best moments, all to ourselves—to soak in—without disturbance." He spoke with extreme shyness, as though it were rather a liberty that he should be attached in this way to men with great names, household words.

He burbled on to the effect that there was something so unhurried and whole-hearted about them : a writer nowadays must be three parts showman. She mustn't be angry with him for having no wish to be up to date. Niece listened, astonished, as she was gently admitted into the good world uncle inhabited ; where Cowper was more alive than Coppard, and Landor than Lawrence. She listened in vain for any word of literary jargon : she heard only the voice of simple affection, as of a man speaking of friends who quickened his power

of appreciating the simple things of life, who helped him to understand. . . . Uncle was an old marvel. She was obliged to start teasing him.

"You are an ancient fraud," she said. "What about motoring and dancing and (she waved her hand) all the rest of it? As though you didn't enjoy things more than any boy—simply lap it up. Just good times, fun, you revel in them! You darling old humbug."

He was too pleased to notice the return of her spirits to mind the injustice of her charge.

"Gaiety without affection . . ." he began, smiling. "Almost anything without affection . . ." he ruminated, and stopped, grown feeble at the thought of what he would have missed if he had not had the gumption to fetch her down.

There ensued a long serious talk which was not interrupted by dinner, or rather an earnest soliloquy by Niece on her idea of what a woman's life might be, what indeed she was anxious to try and make of her life. Independence—above all, not to become ever just the appendage of some man. Have her own pursuits. See? Her own life. She'd love to marry. But not as a career. Did he understand?

Mr. Buffum tried to. He listened without raising any objection, or ever retaliating on her tease of himself by pointing out, as he so easily might, that she was a worse young fraud, and that underneath her flippancy and bravado she was far more deadly in earnest than he was himself. He was content to listen, too pleased to be thus admitted into her confidence to criticize its content. Her talk was intensely interesting to him, though there was nothing particularly original in what she said. She voiced the sentiments of most nice girls, nowadays. "Good gracious!" Mr. Buffum thought, "I may be listening to a future M.P." And he

drew himself up at the thought with becoming respect.

Eventually, towards the end of the evening, came the disclosure, as Mr. Buffum hoped, of her present difficulty.

Many things, it appeared, had come together to upset the conduct of her life. Parents were displeased that she had turned down an offer of marriage from a man whom they considered most eligible. "Eligible" exactly described him. "Lovable" did not; nor any epithet with colour in it. Parents were on hind legs: high time she gave up mad idea of making own life, living in London, learning bad ways. At the office, too, beastly back-chat and bother, which had ended in another girl ousting her from main job. She'd sold her car, so had time to look round. Hold on for six weeks. Seventy-five pounds a year with allowance and own little nest-egg. Casual writings, an uncertain amount. Parents would not advance one single penny more.

Mr. Buffum was so relieved that her trouble was not connected with the ancient woe of woman, that his mind laughed at her difficulty and he said, beaming:

"Oh, my dear child, don't you worry. I'll see you through."

No one likes to have her troubles pooh-poohed. Niece was furious.

"Don't talk rot like that. Awfully nice of you and so on. Thanks very much all the same."

"But surely . . ."

"Wipe it out, Uncle. Wipe it clean out. Sponging on you isn't my idea of a part. See?"

"Put like that . . ." Mr. Buffum stammered. "I'm afraid I've been clumsy."

"That's why I wired, I wasn't coming. I knew I should pour out my woes, and was afraid you'd . . ."

"We'll say no more about it," he hurried to interpose, and noticing that Niece was clad in a blue frock, he had the inspiration to beg her to listen to a new record he had lately bought, in which Mr. John Gosse and his gallant company sing rollicking *Johnnie comes down to Hilo.* The chorus with its

> "OOOH! Wake her,
> Oh shake her,
> OOOOH, wake the girl with the blue dress on."

seemed somehow, to be pleasantly appropriate, and he watched her slyly over his glasses during the progress of the ditty, which, whatever its effect upon Niece Lucia, created at any rate a diversion. The rollick of the song got into Mr. Buffum's blood and emboldened him to say:

"You were a donkey to sell your car; a quite small and furry but absolute donkey. Without consulting me."

"The bus is gone. We won't discuss it, please," said a peremptory niece.

"I was not opening a discussion: I was making a pronouncement," Uncle, unabashed, responded. "Uttering a deep conviction which remains unshaken, because . . ." A firm soft hand was pressed against his lips, preventing speech. He was told to be serious. Something he could do. It was explained that parents were coming to town, he could talk to sister. That might help. He might possibly convince her that daughter was not tripping too fast along the primrose path to the bonfire.

Mr. Buffum tried to back out of it. He was bad at interviews. Could not imagine sister being influenced an eyelid's quiver by anything he might say. Lucia was a monstrous girl, forbidding what he would love to do, urging him to what he would hate to do. She belonged to a perverse and self-willed generation.

Egged him on to selfish extravagance ; refused to allow him to be a nice ordinary useful uncle.

" What could be more useful than to persuade mother I'm a nice respectable girl ? " she assured him.

" But I don't think you are. You are a reprobate," he vainly though truthfully objected.

It was all to no purpose ; he found himself booked to lunch with sister on Thursday, and was informed that he was a most unbrotherly sort of person to be so reluctant to see the only living member of his family.

The interview, when at length the dreaded moment came, did not appear to be a pronounced success. Sister was a stout woman of energy and determination, who considered that Younger Brother wasted his life in dawdling and dreaming. If he could not take an intelligent interest in a political party, and stand for Parliament, he might at least run the Boy Scouts in his village, or do something useful. Her own life was earnest and strenuous : she sat on at least four committees a week (in both senses of the word), sometimes more : never less. The first stages of the interview were occupied in blowing away Mr. Buffum's shadowy effort at existence so thoroughly that he had almost to pinch himself to make sure that any of him was there. He smiled wanly to suppose this flattened, dwindled creature could take up cudgels for anybody : the thought of lifting a cudgel was amusing : let alone wielding it against such an opponent in such a cause.

" I hear you've taken up motoring."

" Yes, dear."

" You see a lot of Lucia ? "

" Yes, dear ; not so much as . . ."

" And have learned to dance ? "

" Yes, dear."

"Do you think this affectation of youthfulness is becoming at your age?"

"No, dear."

"Are you aware Lucia has refused John Evershed?"

"Yes, dear. I mean . . . well—somebody."

"Do you intend to do anything by her later on?"

"Yes, dear."

"Some sense, at any rate, the girl's got. I told her to look you up."

Much became clear to Mr. Buffum. Sister never believed in innuendo.

"I must be frank with you, then, if you intend remembering her in your will. Did you know she spent two nights in George Upland's rooms? Supposed to be nursing him."

"No, dear; but . . ."

"Most foolish conduct: take a lot of explaining! That girl Marion's brother."

There was an awkward silence.

"May I ask if you approve of the way she is living?"

"No, dear. That's to say . . ."

"High time she returned home. At home she would not have an idle hour. This work of her own. This journalism . . . the frailest excuse for gadding about . . ."

Mr. Buffum made a supreme effort.

"I don't approve of her way of living, but I think she is . . . I think she herself is . . ."

"What do you think she is?"

He dwindled and collapsed and trailed off into a weak: "I like her."

Sister eyed him with pained astonishment (not for the first time) that a brother of hers could be so imbecile. She sighed.

"Settle the bill, Augustus, please," she said forgivingly. "I have to be in Farringdon Street at 3.15."

So ended the interview. Not a pronounced success, Mr. Buffum knew.

A mouse might as well set out hopefully to divert a steam-roller from its course. It was out of the question that Niece should dream of trying to live in the same house with her. It couldn't be done. That was the sad conviction that filled his mind and heart to the exclusion of everything else. So, perhaps, the interview was not such a complete failure as it would appear to the flattened mouse, though its direct end of diverting the steam-roller had not been attained.

Heaven! How curiously human beings felt constrained to behave with each other! What odd forms mother love could take!

A mere business interview with his banker, which under ordinary circumstances would have been rather alarming, now proved child's-play. In five minutes he gave instructions to have sold the Deferred shares with which he had been presented on the formation of the great Chemical Combine. Then called for Niece, whom he was to drive down with him, as some compensation for the painful ordeal to which she had subjected him.

He met a very firm-lipped and obdurate Niece, as might be expected after two days with Mother in the offing.

"No good, I suppose?" she queried.

"None. None at all," he hastily admitted. "Less even than I had hoped."

They drove back in silence.

At tea there was awkwardness in the air, of which both were conscious. Lucia noticed Uncle's uneasiness and quailed to think what ghastly indiscretion Mother might not have been seduced by her bright candour into

committing. Mr. Buffum was aware of the distrust in Lucia's mind and wondered how best he could touch and remove it without hurt.

After tea he tackled the difficulty at once. She suggested hearing some records, but he said no ; he wanted her in the study to talk things quietly over.

His beginning was not auspicious.

" In some ways you are very like your dear mother."

" Thank you ! "

" Yes ; you have your directness straight from her."

" Oh, don't ! That awful candour ! Blurting out unpleasantness ! What *has* she been saying now ? "

Mr. Buffum smiled. " A very good thing for me you obeyed her in one respect."

Niece looked startled. " What do you mean ? "

" Looking me up."

" Oh, it is too bad. And why she wanted me to look you up. That was well rubbed in, I gather ? "

" Yes ; she was quite lucid about that."

Niece was furiously blushing. Uncle went on, smiling : " Looking me up was, I believe, the only action in either of our lives (and we underwent the most terrible scrutiny, I assure you) of which she seemed wholly to approve. And I . . . er . . . I . . . on that point alone . . . was inclined to agree with her."

" Well, it's cleared the air at any rate," Niece Lucia laughed out rather harshly. " And now you see why I could never touch a penny of yours. I came to cadge. Suck up. You know. Beastly."

" Yes ; I've noticed the barefaced way you've played up to Uncle for what you could get."

" Liar ! I got fond of you and never did."

" So like her dear mother," Mr. Buffum murmured to the ceiling, " in awful candour ! "

Niece was glowering, not in the mood to respond to

teasing. "Other people," she said bitterly, "muck things up."

Mr. Buffum, unable to catch on to her meaning, continued quietly: "I have made arrangements . . ."

She interrupted him, almost fiercely: "Look here! You're a perfect old lamb to want to help me. But there—is—nothing—doing." She separated each word for emphasis. "Mother's beastly suggestion which I took in first looking you up is one reason. But there's another. Quite as strong. Apart from the fact that money always messes up a relationship. If I took money from you I should feel a pig if I did anything you didn't approve of. Have to account for my actions. And there are heaps of things I should do without a qualm that would shock you pink."

"Oh, I know, dear. Nearly all you do. Like stopping with George two nights to nurse him."

"So she told you that, did she? Well . . . ?"

Her head was back; she was surprised in her mood of challenging grandeur to hear:

"I could almost rub the small, furry donkey's soft nose. How many times must I explain to you that if you ask me *do I approve*? I must answer No. But is your modern brightness incapable of understanding that there is an attitude other than that of approval or disapproval?"

Diffident Uncle began to tower: brazen Niece felt awed to tears. This would never do. The tables must be turned, somehow. And quickly. Meanwhile, Mr. Buffum held the floor. "I don't know enough to judge what is right for others. Each of us knows that, inside, for himself. You do. I believe in you, because I'm rather fond of you."

A minute Niece, awed, tried to gain some foothold by venturing in a small voice: "The old

prophet. Listen to him. You look just like Abinadab."

Uncle, unused to the prophetic rôle, was easily tripped up. He blinked and smiled and inquired : " And who is he ? "

" Ezekiel's father, of course. Or should have been."

But it was a little too much for Niece ; she gave way to absurd uncontrolled laughter and tears, through which words faltered : " You're—quite—too dear——"

" That's as it may be," said Mr. Buffum. " But we'll have no more nonsense about sponging and such ridiculous rubbish. As though I could possibly drive about in a Planet and you without a car. The idea is ludicrous. Absurd. Preposterous."

And he went on murmuring *Unthinkable—Absurd—Preposterous*—to hide the delicious uneasiness which human beings are apt to feel when they have grown a little fonder of each other, and taken a little step towards a closer mutual understanding.

* * * * *

Mr. Buffum's practical arrangements worked out at a car, and £25 a quarter till further notice, which was very nice for Niece.

CHAPTER X

MR. BUFFUM HAS HIS EYES OPENED

MR. BUFFUM disliked being ill almost as much as Monnie disliked him to be ill. He was ashamed of himself; as he was inclined to agree with Samuel Butler that a sick man deserved punishment more often than sympathy. For a man who led such a fortunate life as he did to be sick was not a hair's-breadth short of disgraceful.

However, a particularly merry and vivacious little influenza germ had pounced upon him in the village hall while he was being defeated in the semi-final of the billiards handicap, which he should have won, and after three feverish days and nights in bed he was sitting up wondering whether he wanted a cigarette enough to make it worth while to get up and walk across the room and fetch one from the box which lay on the window-sill, when the telephone bell rang in the hall below.

Kind Eliza was a stern nurse. She had told him that he must on no account leave his room, so on hearing the bell he instantly raised himself up by the arms of his chair and made for the door. But before he could open it he heard the receiver taken off and Eliza's voice in answer.

He returned guiltily to his chair and stretched his ears to listen. He could hear no words, but the change in the tone of Eliza's voice suggested that the speaker at the other end must surely be no tradesman.

He settled back in his chair with a comfortable smile. It was Niece Lucia. He'd lay his hat it was Niece Lucia. The receiver was hung up. No steps came his way. The comfortable smile faded. He waited for Eliza's steps : for ten long minutes he waited. Merely to irritate him, she went into the house-place, slammed about and returned to the kitchen. She was due with his glass of orange juice at 11.30. Surely no decent woman in her senses would keep a man confined to his room waiting for twenty minutes, merely to save one journey up the stairs and one journey down. Mr. Buffum surveyed the world and found it bad, definitely bad : his life, a mistake ; himself a noble failure, long-suffering among thoughtless, selfish beings. His grievance spread to particulars.

Fancy permitting Mr. Wallace to write Racing Chat. It was iniquitous. How could a man convalesce properly without at least ten unread Wallaces piled at his elbow : only a miserable half-volume left—and they were short stories !

Eventually Eliza came. There were three pips in his orange juice. He stared coldly at them but refrained from mentioning their presence. Even a sick eye could observe that the woman was excited about something. Yet she stood there smiling and saying nothing, expecting him to start chatting, no doubt.

At last Mr. Buffum controlled his very natural indignation sufficiently to speak : he put a leading question in a casual voice :

" Did I hear the telephone bell, Eliza ? "

The foolish woman started, flamed into a sudden flush and instantly answered : " Yes, sir ! "

Mr. Buffum sipped his orange juice and waited : waited in vain : he raised a questioning brow, and noticed that Eliza was gazing vacantly at the mantel-

piece like a girl surprised in a guilty secret and assuming innocence.

"No message for me, I take it," he brought himself to remark.

"No, sir; or I should, of course, have delivered it at once."

She appeared strangely agitated. After all, Eliza could be very little over forty. She had seemed hitherto contented enough: but most people's lives contained some mystery. Passionate possibilities invaded Mr. Buffum's mind. He skidded badly from gloomy grandeur; slewed completely round backwards in abject apology:

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Eliza. I might have known it was a private message."

Eliza found the need to swallow hard and clear her throat carefully before she said in an unusual voice: "Not at all."

"I get most shockingly irritable, you know."

"That's a very healthy sign. Poison working out of the system. A nasty thing, this influenza, drags a person right down; but you're on the mend now, and I've got a nice piece of sole for your lunch and we'll soon have you hoppin' round the place again merry as a sand-boy, quite your old self, and if you'll tip down that last little drop I'll take the glass with me as I've quite plenty to do, and the more you can sleep, the sooner you'll mend."

She went talking on and on; then almost snatched the glass from his fingers and hurriedly left the room.

Mr. Buffum pondered, astonished. He felt selfish in the earnestness of his hope that she was not in love. Monnie's father and mother and Eliza and he were such a pleasant little family party. Still, change was the law of life.

His story failed to grip him and he dozed.

A more familiar Eliza brought his lunch, and watched him eat his sole.

" Do you know, I thought it was Niece Lucia when the 'phone bell rang. Quite absurd tricks the mind plays on one when one is weakish. That's what made me grumpy as a disappointed small boy. As a matter of fact, I very much prefer not to see people I'm fond of when I'm ill. Nothing is farther from my taste than to be fussed over and petted and so forth when I'm seedy. I very much prefer to be alone. Very much."

" Yes. I'm sure you do. I can't see these modern girls in a sick-room."

Mr. Buffum was surprised at this agreement. " You've not quite caught my meaning, Eliza. I mean I want to be at my best so that I am better able to appreciate their company."

Eliza elicited a large and dubious " Oh ! "

Mr. Buffum felt chatty ; he continued : " I know you have a theory that men never know what they do want."

Eliza pulled the crushed pillow up from behind his back and said kindly : " That's not my theory ; that's my experience."

Mr. Buffum laughed. " I'm at your mercy. You interrupt what I was going to say by making me more comfortable, then lay me out with words. A competent woman has a man at her mercy."

" Lucky for the man that she does."

" The unfairness of it shrieks to heaven."

" Men are spoilt babies ; the sooner a woman learns that, the sooner she'll grow wise."

" You put the unfairness into a nutshell. You insist on spoiling me : then blame me for being spoiled."

" Oh, you'll pass. And, anyhow, you're looking twice the man you did yesterday."

" I shall be hopping about like a sand-boy to-morrow, as you put it. A nice way of describing an elderly gentleman's quiet activities."

" And now you'd better lie down and get a proper sleep." She tucked him up on the couch, drew the curtains and left him : whereupon Mr. Buffum, convinced that sleep was quite impossible, obediently slept. He lay dozing, mildly wondering at his capacity for sleep and refusing to wake fully up, when a tentative tapping at the door roused him. This was not Eliza who tapped and entered. Who was it, then ? The latch was lifted, the door a little opened. Niece Lucia's voice said : " May I come in ? "

" Yes, oh yes, you may ! " said Mr. Buffum.

She ran in : sat on the couch by him : stroked his forehead.

" Fancy your coming now, you darling girl ! "

" Eliza told me you were ill."

" Oh ! " said Mr. Buffum.

" Yes. I made her promise to ring me up. I know what you are. I 'phoned this morning asking if she thought you'd like to see me. She said she thought you would. Do you ? "

" Yes. Very much. Only . . ."

" What ? "

" Oh, never mind. It doesn't matter."

" Cough it up, Old Man. Bring it well off the chest —the reservation."

" Quite dutiful and right, of course. When a person has—er—has been of some help, to come and see him when he's sick."

" How clever you are ! " said Lucia jauntily. " That's just exactly it ! Put so delicately, too. Repay you. . . . It must sharpen your wits, being ill." She removed herself from the sofa.

"Oh dear! I do like you!" said Mr. Buffum, feebly rolling his face over on the cushion. "Perhaps you'll tell me exactly why you have come. I like to have some things well rubbed in, you know. I like to wallow in them."

"Oh, do you!" said Niece firmly, moved by his huge contentment at her presence. "Well, as a matter of fact, I like to be on sure ground and I never step up from the bargain basement. Gratitude is expectation of favours to come. You're a most objectionable old man. I don't think I like you much when you're scrubby and ill and generally disgusting."

"No," said Mr. Buffum blissfully. "I feel you don't."

He took advantage of his convalescence quietly to say things which are perhaps better left unsaid. "Coming all this way just *to be with me*. Affection. There is nothing lovelier in the world than affection."

"Now then, Old Man, don't get potty. You're hopelessly on the wrong side of the road. I know how Eliza spoils you and how soft and sorry you get for yourself, so I ran down to brace you up and show you you aren't a quarter as bad as you imagine. Stop your ghastly moping."

Mr. Buffum continued to lie back wallowing in contentment.

"No one ever before has come quite so far just to be with me."

"Stop it now, will you! I thought I'd come and came. Nothing could be simpler or more natural."

"That's just it. Or more heavenly nice for me."

"Will you stop making mountains out of molehills!"

"I'm only stating facts, dear, quietly and without any exaggeration. In fact," he raised his head, "rather understating them."

"The truth is you're mad at being waked up and having to wait for your tea."

"Yes. Yes." Mr. Buffum smiled. "That's it. Especially when one sleeps in the afternoon, the only hope is an immediate cup of hot tea."

"There you are, you see. You're a complete old fraud with your polite speeches. I can see right through you, through and through."

"How I hope you can!"

"Well, if you want to know," she sat abruptly down on the couch and swift fingers gave a quick touch to his forehead, "it is rather nice here—being with you." She jumped up.

"I'll help Eliza with the tea."

She ran out of the room.

After tea Niece insisted on a bout of Bezique, challenging him to play her 10,000 up. Mr. Buffum's plea for Piquette as a far better game was swept away;—much too strenuous for an invalid. Niece romped away with it; taught him Euchre, and saw that he was in bed by 10.15, whither he went grumbling that he wasn't an atom tired.

Next morning was warm enough for him to sit in the garden. His legs were weak but obedient. He felt cheerful and amazingly better. Of course he disliked to be fussed over and petted when he was not quite up to the mark, but a long quiet week-end with Niece was a very different matter. He carefully explained this to Eliza, that there might be no misunderstanding, and she listened to his explanation without comment.

He was sitting in the garden, waiting for Lucia to return from shopping, when a car roared up the drive. Monnie dived through bushes and under the pergola, and with awed face panted:

"Gov'nor! It's a supercharged Sports!"

"Who is in it?" Mr. Buffum asked, in deep chagrin.

"Dunno! Stranger bloke, but he's some driver: a double change down in one as he turned into the drive."

"Go and see who it is."

Monnie disappeared. The car stopped.

Mr. Buffum heard a young assured voice inquire cheerily: "Does Mr. Buffum live here?"

Came Monnie's quick, shy "Yessir!"

"Good for me! Got it in one! Does his niece Miss Lucia Dakin happen to be staying here?"

Again the quick, shy "Yessir!"

Mr. Buffum waited, hearing the sound of their voices but no words. He would rather have been told of this visit. It was silly of him to suppose that she had come all that way merely to be with him. No wonder she had been cross with him when he made the suggestion. It was dear of her to come at all. He must not be foolish and selfish. Young people were young people, especially nowadays. He must try and not be old-fashioned in his ways. Of course she had gone for a run to meet him and missed him. What could be more natural? The road was difficult to find.

He would see them at meals. Their company would be pleasant. He would enjoy it more if he weren't seedy. Anyhow, he would be obliged to rest a lot and it would be nicer for Niece to have a companion of her own age. Didn't he want her to treat the place as her home?

But his heart sank a little, and sank a little more when the bright owner of the supercharged Sports model tentatively appeared through the pergola and looked about, hesitating. Surplus plus-fours, violent stockings, a squash hat rakishly tilted—a most brilliant and alarming young man. Now, which of the Y.M.L.A. (or Young Men's Lucia Association) could this be? Mr. Buffum ran through names in hopeless confusion.

Monnie's voice directed, "Gov'nor's on the lawn to yer lef'." The young man strode forward. Mr. Buffum rose, feeling most awkward as he held his rug round him with the left hand, extending the right in welcome. It was seized and gripped.

"Mr. Buffum? Hope I'm not intruding." (He gave a happy laugh and blinked.) "Passing this way, and pushed in. What?" (The laugh and blink were repeated.)

"Any friend of my niece is always welcome," said Mr. Buffum courteously.

Monnie, breathless, staggered out with a chair, on which the young man seated himself and then began to twiddle his hat round his finger.

"Bobbie," he announced, intent on the twiddling, "Bobbie Linthrop. Passing, you know, and just pushed in. What?"

"Quite," said Mr. Buffum. "My niece will be back at any minute."

"I say. Friend . . ." (He jumped up.) "Sure I'm not intruding? Perhaps I'd better . . ." (Again the laugh and blink as he collapsed into the chair.) "Priceless lark! Stunning girl. I mean—this is a priceless little place you've got, sir. Mind if I smoke?" (He produced a gold cigarette-case from his waistcoat.) "Have one. No?"

He tossed up a cigarette to his mouth, missed, caught it in his hand, tried again, missed.

"If not in five, my luck's dead out."

But the fifth was successful.

"Close shave, that," he said as he lighted it. "Bobbie. Bobbie Linthrop. That's my name. If my luck's out, I can do nothing."

Mr. Buffum wondered if this was the youth's ordinary manner, which was so strange and new to him that he

could not make up his mind whether the young man was suffering from extreme shyness or from extreme self-assurance.

"This is the modern manner," he thought to himself a little sadly. "I must try and not appear too old-fashioned. He will be calling me '*dear old bean*' soon, and I must not mind."

The young man was sprawling in his chair, elaborately and noisily smoking, inhaling enormous draughts of tobacco and blowing them out to heaven, with arms flung wide.

Mr. Buffum watched him, much impressed. "Dear me!" he thought, "that's the way to smoke a cigarette," and endeavoured not to feel too much of an old fogey merely because he could never hope to smoke with such perfect modern abandon.

He hardly liked to interrupt the ceremony, but at last he ventured to remark: "I hope you will be able to take lunch with us."

Bobby Linthrop started, sat up, swallowed smoke, choked, and gasped out: "Oh, I say. You know. Well, of course. That is most awfully decent of you."

Coughing stopped him. Mr. Buffum felt guilty that his interruption had so disastrously broken, as it were, the spell of the ceremony; but Bobbie did not seem greatly to mind, for as soon as he could speak he said:

"Don't you let me butt in! I mean . . . You see. It's like this . . ." He leaned forward, paused to inhale with great success, and to blow out a long puff of smoke. "Lucia Dakin, your niece . . ."

Mr. Buffum waited, expecting and dreading a confidence, but Bobbie tailed off into—"I was passing, you know, and just pushed in," a remark which, Mr. Buffum thought, as he had heard it before quite distinctly, it was unnecessary to repeat with such fervour.

Obviously he ought to try and put the poor young man at his ease, and he would have done so if he had been quite sure whether the young man was ill-at-ease at talking with such a poor old specimen or for some more personal reason of his own.

Mr. Buffum was on the point of making a modest attempt to soothe his visitor when the young man at last achieved the manner after which he had been struggling and said with the kindly condescension due to an old fellow, stuck away in the country : " Awful pretty place you have here, sir."

" I'm so glad you like it," said Mr. Buffum, hot to think how near he had been to taking a false step. He observed the young man eyeing him under half-closed lids, and, looking away, saw Monnie hovering by the wonder car. To create a diversion he called the boy :

" Monnie, tell Eliza that the young gentleman is staying to lunch. And, Monnie, bring out a bottle of beer."

" Right, Gov'nor," Monnie answered, eager to do anything for the owner of such a car.

" Topping kid," said Robert, responsive to Monnie's awe.

" He takes a passionate interest in motors," said Mr. Buffum, suddenly conscious that there was something really nice in this young man after all.

" Shall I take him for a spin ? "

" He'd adore it," said Mr. Buffum. " Most delightful of you to suggest it."

" Not a bit ! Not a bit ! "

How easy it was to misjudge people, especially if their manner was not quite what one was accustomed to !

Monnie appeared, advancing from the house circumspectly, staring at a bottle and two glasses balanced on a tray. He stopped a few yards away, uncertain

whether to set the tray down and hand the bottle and glasses or to present the bottle on the tray.

At last Mr. Buffum realized his difficulty.

"Bring it here, Monnie," he said.

"Oh, I say!" Bobbie exploded. "What about a little dash round, young fellah? And then a drink thereafterwards?"

"What! Me?" gasped Monnie, nearly dropping the tray. "In a supercharged Sports——!"

Bobbie burst into a loud glad laugh which warmed Mr. Buffum's heart, and when they walked off, Bobbie's hand on the boy's shoulder, speaking of a stretch of straight road where they could let her out, his heart was completely won. The car roared off.

When Eliza approached to find out about the strange visitor, he said:

"That's Mr. Linthrop, Eliza. A friend of Miss Lucia's. He has a heart of pure gold. Entirely on his own, he suggested taking Monnie for a run. He is staying to lunch. Perhaps we ought to offer him a shake-down for the night. Or to stay over the week-end. It'll be a delightful surprise for Miss Lucia when she returns."

"Oh!" said Eliza. "Miss Lucia doesn't know he's coming, then?"

"Well, she didn't mention it to me. But I expect . . . you know what young people are . . . she let him understand . . . how shall I say? That she'd be alone with old Uncle . . . I want her to feel the place is like a home. That she can make her own arrangements in her own way. I've only asked him to lunch as yet. I'm always rather backward."

"Oh!" said Eliza coldly. "I see. Are you going to drink that beer or have the white of egg and milk I've got ready for you?"

"What doesn't please you, now, Eliza?"

"One needn't say much, but one can think a lot!" said Eliza darkly.

"I don't know what there is to upset you."

"And who says I am upset?"

"You can't expect others to think about me as you do."

"Tst! Listen to the man!" Eliza apparently addressed a leaf on a distant tree.

"Something is displeasing you."

"Maybe yes. Maybe no. But I've got plenty to do. Can't stop here talking. That won't get us married to-morrow!"

"I'd much rather you told me," Mr. Buffum persisted, though he was aware that Eliza fell back on old sayings for support only in her most obstinate mood.

"Shall I make up the bed in the spare room?"

"Well—I really can't quite say . . . that depends . . ."

"He'll stay if he's asked," said Eliza with a bitterness Mr. Buffum quite failed to understand. Then she sighed, and Mr. Buffum being too puzzled to speak, she went on: "Perhaps you *can* tell me about your milk."

"Of course, I want the drink you've been kind enough to get ready for me."

She brought the glass out, still dark and unbending, and Mr. Buffum made one last pathetic plea to find the cause of her annoyance. He extracted nothing more illuminating than, "There's things I like, and things I don't. I know his sort."

Mr. Buffum gave it up, and concentrated, as he sipped his invalid's concoction, on the delightful surprise that was waiting for Niece Lucia on her return. He felt that he had quite conquered his selfishness and that the foolish hurt at not being told of the young man's coming

was mainly due to his not being quite up to the mark after his little bout of 'flu. A girl could not blurt out these things : could not, however modern, make definite plans like a housekeeper ; must leave room for romantic possibilities : and what could be more romantic than to throw out a hint and to leave it to the gallant to saddle his horse and come galloping after. . . . It was not their fault that the horse had vanished before horse-power—romance had not changed : only the trappings and suits of romance. It was all perfectly clear and intelligible to a sane man. The worst of illness was that it filled a man with self-pity, and self-pity dulled and stupefied.

Certainly the young man—Bobbie Linthrop—must be persuaded to stop the week-end. And on Monday morning he could give Lucia fifteen minutes' start and race her to London. That would be amusing. That would lend zest—pursuit in courtship—marriage by capture. He'd show them old Uncle wasn't too much of a fogey to enter into the new spirit of things. He'd show them. After all, he knew enough about driving a car to be able to understand the pleasure of speeding in chase of a girl at fifty miles an hour.

Ah ! Here Niece Lucia was. He'd not break the happy news to her quite at once. She came hurrying towards him.

" Out in the garden ! " she cried. " That's capital ! "

" Yes. I'm feeling ever so much better."

He beamed comprehensively, and Niece, instantly sensing something in the wind, said :

" What's the matter, Old Man ? "

" Nothing now. Self-pity *was* the matter."

" Rubbish ! " Lucia answered, quite unimpressed.

" Only last night, you said yourself . . ."

" I was rotting you."

"There's many a true word spoken in . . ."

"No truth in that jest. Beer. Oh, good!"

She leaned over for bottle and glass.

"Two glasses?" she commented, questioning. "Not past the egg-and-milk stage, are you, Old Man?"

"No. *I'm* not," he answered, mysteriously stressing the pronoun.

Niece unscrewed the stopper, deftly poured out a glass of beer, looked straight at him over its top, drank appreciatively, sighed happily and said without concern:

"Bubbling with news. But take your own time. Don't let me spoil it. If you've got a cigarette on you, though . . ."

Mr. Buffum hastily produced his case, still beaming.

"I've had a visitor," he announced, watching her face.

Niece Lucia lighted her cigarette, waiting for further information. Mr. Buffum liked her unshakable coolness.

"I'll give you three guesses."

Not an eyelid quivered, not the remotest sign appeared to give her away. None would, of course. Niece could carry anything off. Mr. Buffum was proud of her. Envious, too, of her perfect composure, aware of the dither that would be agitating himself if placed in her shoes.

"The curate," she suggested innocently as a child playing a game it wasn't awfully keen on.

Mr. Buffum could not help laughing.

"I say, Old Man, what is amusing you?" she asked, taking another quiet drink at the beer; then leaned comfortably back to remark slowly: "It is good here with you. So peaceful."

Mr. Buffum enjoyed his little comedy to the full.

"I expect it is. Almost too peaceful. But you're not guessing."

"Sorry. No. I forgot. What is his name? You know—the doctor chap."

"You're on the wrong tack. It was someone who was passing and just pushed in."

"Good Heaven!" She started. "You don't mean Bobbie . . . Bobbie Linthrop?"

Mr. Buffum's beam deepened into a chuckle.

"Yes, I do mean Bobbie! Bobbie Linthrop. However did you guess?"

"Guess! Gosh! He drops in at any old earthly hour and always says, 'I was passing and just pushed in.' Egregious ass!"

She imitated laugh and blink and voice.

"That just about does put the lid on. Thank the Lord you had the sense to push him out—passing and just pushed in. Like his infernal cheek!"

Mr. Buffum was beginning to stammer explanation when Eliza came walking primly out.

"I prefer to get the beds made in proper time," she said, "which is, of a morning. So I've made the young gentleman's bed up in the spare room. I thought I'd better let you know."

Lucia gasped.

"Made the young gentleman's bed up! Whatever do you mean?"

"What I say, Miss Lucia."

"You don't mean to say . . .?" she began, but words failed her. "Great Heavens!" She blankly uttered the words, half supplication, half curse, modified by no amusement.

"My dear, you must not misunderstand me. I naturally supposed . . . I mean . . . I have not asked

your friend to stay the night or the week-end. I'm very backward at these things, and at first I must say . . . but he took Monnie, absolutely on his own suggestion, for a drive in his super Sports charger . . . I mean his supercharged sporter . . . and . . . he is a very good-hearted young fellow. He was most earnest about . . . about . . . butting in, and of course . . ."

Mr. Buffum waved weak hands: both women were staring at him: he could not face their stare—the stare of people at a curiosity.

"It all seemed most natural," he pleaded.

Lucia turned away in silence from him. She spoke to Eliza, as one sensible person speaking to another sensible person, with relief.

"I'm so sorry that you should have had all that trouble for nothing, Eliza. I'll help you unmake the bed."

They left Mr. Buffum without a word, and left him disconsolate. He very soon found himself (what man would not?) generalizing about women, with special reference to their unaccountability.

What ought he to have done? He was not responsible for the young man's coming. Bobbie Linthrop was obviously a most good-natured young fellow—with any amount of dash about him—devoted to Lucia—extremely well-to-do. He must have had some encouragement . . .

Mr. Buffum thought wistfully of some sort of Men's League. It was unpleasant to be made to feel like a smacked baby, when his only fault lay in being too hospitable to her visitors.

The returning car roared up the drive. He was really in a most awkward position—quite compromising indeed—with regard to the young fellow.

Monnie's head dodged over the hedge: Monnie's

body came tearing through the yew hedge—a strictly forbidden path.

"I say, Gov'nor. We touched sixty-five. We touched sixty-five. Honest we did. Lumme! She can move. She can do over seventy, but the road wasn't long enough: not the straight."

Bobbie Linthrop joined them, quite at his ease, like an old friend.

"Yes. She's a good little bus, sir. What about that drink?"

Monnie fled off towards the cottage to tell the great tidings, presumably, to his mother. Bobbie helped himself to beer and sat down.

Mr. Buffum announced, he hoped quite casually: "My niece has returned."

But the effect on Bobbie was enormous. He started, nearly upset his glass of beer, leaned forward and asked tensely:

"Well—what about it?"

Really, thought Mr. Buffum, it was too bad to leave him to bear the brunt of it. She must have heard the car come back.

"I mentioned . . ." He hesitated. "I mentioned that you were passing and—er . . . and just pushed in."

A horrified look settled on Bobbie's face.

"Not those words?"

"Yes. So far as I remember. Those were the very words."

"That's torn it," he groaned, and forlornly drained his glass of beer.

"But whatever words I may have used . . ." Mr. Buffum began indignantly.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. You couldn't know. And five's supposed to be my lucky number, and I caught it at the fifth. I did, now, didn't I?"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Buffum, bewildered.

"The cigarette, you know." He took one from his case and put it sadly in his mouth. "I haven't the heart to try again."

"Oh—ah—yes. I recall . . ."

"And she went off the deep end," he added, viciously jabbing a finger on a large lighter. "The thing won't work, of course. It wouldn't. Not my day. Have you got a match?"

Mr. Buffum, eager to be comforting, fumbled hastily for his match-box and handed it as kindly as he knew how.

"Ticklish job! A fellow doesn't know what to do to please 'em."

"I have often felt that," Mr. Buffum was bound to admit. All ways seemed to lead him in a wrong direction to a position falser than the last.

"If you were a girl now, wouldn't you like a chap to come all the way from London for a glimpse of you?"

It was a violent hypothesis; but Mr. Buffum did his best to imagine himself a girl and eventually faltered out:

"Well, it might depend, you know . . ."

"Oh, say it! Say it! Don't mind me!" the young man cried.

At last Niece Lucia was coming. She came swiftly out and was upon them almost before Robert could rise and turn.

"Ah, Bobbie!" she said, shaking his limp hand briskly. "Getting on famously with Uncle, I see. But you mustn't keep him, dear, or he'll be late for lunch with his aunt at Bimberton."

Niece stood by Mr. Buffum's chair. Poor Robert had collapsed into his own seat. Now he struggled on to his feet.

"Won't you sit here?"

Mr. Buffum said, "Let me fetch another chair," and began to rise but was pushed quietly down by a firm hand.

"I don't know where Bimberton is," poor Robert said feebly.

Mr. Buffum said, "Let me fetch a map," and began to rise but was again pushed quietly down by a firm hand.

"He ought to know where his aunt lives."

"I might if I had one," said Bobbie miserably.

"You must understand I will not be followed about." The quietness in her voice gave it a deadly emphasis.

Robert became almost tearful. "How can I lunch at Bimberton with my aunt if I don't know where Bimberton is and haven't got an aunt? I believe you're only just sending me off."

"Be careful, Bobbie, or the sudden brain-wave may prove too much for you."

Mr. Buffum felt more and more on prickles of uneasiness; he had been guilty of helping to lure the poor young man to this awful discomfiture. So, summoning all his courage, he said: "You must allow me to thank you very warmly for the delight you have given Monnie in taking him for a drive in your wonderful car."

"Yes, that was jolly decent of you, Bobbie. Your trip is far from wasted. He'll never forget it."

"But I say, look here," he brightened to begin. "Won't you . . . ?"

"Certainly," said Lucia. "I'd love to see you start her up."

Bobbie drooped and rose.

"Oh, all right, then! Good-bye, sir. Not my day. Though I swear that five is my lucky number."

He sagged away, a pathetic figure in his surplus plus-fours and violent stockings, faintly expostulating to a taut, upright, indomitable Niece.

The supercharged Sports roared off. A demure girl returned and sat down to look very straight at a bewildered and uncomfortable Uncle, who broke a silence that was painful to him by saying:

"My dear, really. I have never heard a human being spoken to as . . ."

"Bobbie's Bobbie," she said as though reminding him, not taking her eyes off his face.

"Yes, but, after all, you know . . ." Mr. Buffum struggled on, "a human being . . . no human being . . . I mean . . ." He gave it up. His words were not touching Niece Lucia. She remained silent and still. Then she said quietly:

"You didn't really suppose, did you, that I'd arranged to plant Bobbie Linthrop on you for the week-end?"

"Not quite arranged: so much as—well . . . it seemed only natural. I mean—a companion of your own age. I'm only too glad you should do as you like here. That's to say. It must be rather dull, and I don't yet quite understand modern ways of going on. It has all so changed. . . . He seemed a good-hearted young fellow."

"What a furtive little beast you must think me!"

"Now, please, dear. Don't take it like that. There's no need to be angry."

"I am angry. I'm furious."

"I beg you not to be."

"Must you always think that unless some boy is messing about round me I can't be happy?"

"My dear, put like that . . . it sounds as though . . . but you must admit it is pleasant to have . . . to

have boy friends. Pleasanter than . . . an elderly relation can easily become a bore."

"I am not aware that I have ever pretended not to like what you call boy friends."

There was an awkward silence. Mr. Buffum found it difficult to stand up to such very direct, determined speech. Niece's eyes began to twinkle.

"I am afraid you're rather a horrible old man."

"It is uncommonly pleasant to know that one is liked: and uncommonly difficult to believe it," Mr. Buffum managed to say.

"Not a nice man," she murmured. "No. Not really a nice man! All your fault I was almost curt with poor Bobbie."

"Heaven help the man you're quite curt with."

"He must have heard me tell Marion I was coming here and wormed the address out of someone. Bobbie's right enough in a way. But he's far too rich and far too spoiled and far too thick. It's unkind to let anyone become a nuisance. One has simply to heave and shoulder him out of the light. He'd brought his suit-case with him, you know."

Vivid in Mr. Buffum's chivalrous mind still lingered the image of the soft girl among ruthless men in the great town. His eyes opened to another picture as Niece revealed herself—of a resolute young person sure of herself, tough, firm-lipped . . .

And suddenly she was kneeling by his side, yielding and tender and saying in a very different voice:

"I'm so fond of you, darling. I'm never bored with you. You're such a friend: so utterly and completely dear. I hate you to think I'm a little beast who can't appreciate anything and only wants to make use of you. You mustn't ever think that for a single second."

Mr. Buffum stroked her cropped head and said " My dear ! My dear ! " quite distinctly, considering how much he was moved.

As suddenly she jumped up and gave one good healthy sniff, not pretty, but finally effective. Then turned on him :

" Yes. Really a horrible old man. Glad to take a mean advantage. Oh, if you weren't an invalid, how I'd shake you ! You're disgruntling and disgusting and detestable. I wish now you'd allowed dear, simple Bobbie to stay, instead of packing him off with a flea in his ear. And Eliza tells me you dislike being petted and fussed over when you're ill. You told her so with your own lips. You accomplished old fraud ! Oh, how she laughed ! Who could help it ! For goodness' sake, give me a cigarette and don't look at me like that."

Mr. Buffum obeyed one behest and handed her a cigarette. He disobeyed the other behest and continued to " look at her like that " ; moreover, made his disobedience more flagrant by saying with no apology :

" I should like you to realize, young woman, the enormous difference you make in my life."

" Oh, do I ! " said Niece quickly, between little puffs at her cigarette. " I'm glad."

CHAPTER XI

MR. BUFFUM FAILS TO PROPOSE

MR. BUFFUM was alone in the house, as Eliza had gone with Monnie's mother for a day's excursion by motor-coach to Tunbridge Wells and Hastings. He was wearing his neat blue suit and held in his hand the milk-bottle, wondering for the hundredth time how the cardboard circle could be removed from the top without generously spraying his arm and shoulder with creamy milk: experience had only taught him not to lean over the cardboard circle as he pressed his finger down (that resulted in a smother of milk in eyes and over face and waistcoat); it had not taught him how the horrid disc could be removed with no splash at all. He had always meant to learn the secret from Monnie's father—a mine of useful information on many subjects other than gardening—but the good man was never there at the crucial moment, and it is not a point that pops to the memory at any time and in any place.

Cautious pressure, a sudden snap, a greasy douche, a curse, a careful mopping-up—and the beastly thing is forgotten as quickly as possible until the next occasion.

Queer that milk, which was so good and necessary in its right place—a cup of tea—should be so messy and unpleasant in its wrong place; in his eye, for instance, or on his neat blue suit.

Mr. Buffum gingerly pressed his finger, prepared for

the inevitable splash, when to his surprise the disc moved beautifully down for no reason that he could fathom, and he was able to remove it without even wetting his finger.

This minor triumph heightened Mr. Buffum's good spirits, which were already set fair. He had the house to himself, which was always a mysterious joy though one which could very easily be overdone, as he had found to his cost one spring, when Eliza had been called away to a sick sister and Monnie's mother had been taken ill.

He had his tea in the kitchen—a room which he had always liked very much from his earliest childhood. He felt deliciously free and independent and on his own, with no eye to inspect, no tongue to comment, and no feet to intrude.

Not only over the cardboard disc had Mr. Buffum gained a victory; he had gained a victory (and a less accidental one) over Eliza, who, when she heard that Miss Marion and Miss Lucia were coming on the day of her outing, had decided that her place in the motor-coach had better be taken by somebody else. Mr. Buffum had decided otherwise, stood his ground in a fierce battle and won the day. Indeed, he had become quite masterful, flatly denying that potatoes were a necessary adjunct to cold chicken and salad, and flatly refusing to cook them: or to allow Monnie or Monnie's father to cook them for him.

"I'll have them peeled and ready in the saucepan, and surely to goodness it's no trouble to put the saucepan on the stove and dish them up!"

But Mr. Buffum was adamant: he would not even discuss the matter.

"Oh, well, please yourself, then," Eliza quite tossed her head back to answer, and he retorted, laughing:

"That is exactly what I intend to do, dear Eliza." Whereat Eliza had to laugh too, only saving herself by the usual: "You men!" Of this victorious little bout Mr. Buffum thought, smiling, as he listened to the fussy tick of the kitchen alarum clock. His cup of tea tasted very good to him, sitting at the corner of the kitchen table, on which lay two rock-buns. What was the use of having an unnecessary plate to wash up? None, of course. Absolutely none whatever. And really the rock-bun as he nibbled it tasted better off the table's linoleum. We do cumber up our lives with such paraphernalia!

And being alone and at the top of contentment, his mind took one sudden gigantic leap from tiny happy things into the middle of that which was most momentous.

Miss Marion's voice was saying: "Yes, dear, of course, I have known and have been wondering for months why you have not asked me. Nothing would please me more than to come into your life and share it. We understand each other so well."

And his mind's eye at one swoop pictured years of richer understanding, a vista of glad life, with the same ease as a man's eye on a hill-top surveys a stretch of five counties in the sunshine when the landscape has been washed clear by rain. Every one in their small circle becoming closer to each other, growing happier and more alive, growing more sensitive as they grew older, less touchy, less cross, less selfish, not boxed up in bodily disability . . . though bodies age.

The immediate effect of this rosy dreaming was that Mr. Buffum allowed his tea to become cold and over-drawn in the pot. There was no time to boil more water and make a fresh cup, because the table had to be laid for supper—a job for which he needed a good

half-hour at least. He wanted to have all ready by the time Miss Marion and Niece Lucia came, and he disliked to be hurried. The bird carver and fork : two knives each, one large, one small : one large fork : fish knives : spoon and fork for the trifle : napkins : cruets : bread and bread-knife : mats for the plates : plates : he ran through in his mind what was wanted, then set to work leisurely laying the things on the polished oak table. Last thing, he would mix the salad : and of course if they were late the salad would probably have lost its freshness. Perhaps he had better mix the salad after they had come, while they were changing their frocks. It *would* be wiser.

And his mind kept swinging happily from the trivial to the tall. He thought of his sister, Lucia's mother, and her passion for politics and social work, which he could not share. His own position was very clear at this moment while he surveyed the well-laid table, in glad anticipation of the party to come. Let each man eliminate bullying and bad temper from his most private world, then slowly goodwill might spread to the village, from the village to the county, from the county to the country. . . . Peace in our time. . . .

But perhaps Miss Marion and Niece Lucia did not like the salad mixed—foolish girls might prefer to pour a manufactured cream from a bottle. . . .

Men used ideals to batter the next man's head with, not to live by : used them as weapons of offence rather than as staffs upon their own way.

The wine-glasses, the wine-glasses, he had forgotten the wine-glasses and the wine ! What was a feast without wine ? And his personal attention to the table had already transformed the meal from mere cold supper to a feast. This was an occasion.

Monnie's grinning face, pushed in through the House-Place door, disturbed his pleasant ruminations.

"Lumme! Look at this, now!" the boy said, accountably amused. "Who'd have thought it!"

"Why!" said Mr. Buffum, annoyed at the harsh interruption. "I see nothing wrong." And he scrutinized the table for some misplacement.

"Oh, there's nothing as you might call wrong," the horrid boy gloated over the error which he had instantly spotted, and which Mr. Buffum, stare as he might, could not see for himself. "Some likes one thing and some likes another."

He collapsed into laughter, ejaculating, "Oh, 'elp!"

"Now. Come. What is it, Monnie?" asked Mr. Buffum, touched on his vanity.

"'Course! I forgot. You're all left-'anded!" he laughed, wringing the last drop from his wretched joke. Then at last he staggered to the table and changed the respective places of the knives and forks.

"I can't see what there is so very funny in what is after all a most natural mistake," Mr. Buffum declared.

And Monnie rocked with laughter.

"Oh, no, Gov'nor, there isn't. But you are just about the limit."

His laughter proved too infectious for Mr. Buffum to resist. He cuffed his head and kicked him with deep satisfaction, and said:

"Look here, you outrageous imp! You can keep this to yourself. If you tell your mother or Eliza, it's the sort of thing I should never hear the last of."

"No. I won't, not if I can 'elp it . . . only . . ."

Mr. Buffum did not feel reassured. But Monnie became suddenly serious to say, as he lifted the lid of the mustard-pot:

"Mother thought you'd want fresh mustard. See here!"

They peered into an empty pot.

"The mustard tin's on the second shelf at the very back on the left."

His hand reached out for the mustard-pot, but Mr. Buffum was before him.

"I will make the mustard, Monnie," he announced. "I have always liked mixing mustard. You fetch the tin—and a teaspoon from the kitchen drawer. The great thing, you know, is to make plenty and not drown it."

He took the tin and spoon from Monnie. It was a serious business. Both faces wore an intent look.

"One spoonful each, eh?" said Mr. Buffum. "And one for the pot. Though it's not tea we're making. Let's see. Is it hot water we want or cold?"

"You'd better give it me," urged Monnie.

"Some make it with vinegar," continued Mr. Buffum, ignoring Monnie's absurd suggestion and turning the cold-water tap on to a dribble, under which he held the mustard-pot.

"Ah!" he remarked with fat appreciation, as he stirred the yellow powder to a good paste.

"That's too thick," commented Monnie. "Give her a drop more."

Mr. Buffum held the pot under the dribbling tap.

"Not too much, now!"

He stirred again, a lovely mess.

"A bit thin."

"We can always add more mustard, Monnie," said Mr. Buffum, doing so. "There now!" he cried after a few moments' staring stirring. "Not a lump. Smooth as milk. Perfect."

"The pot's in a bit of a mess, isn't it?"

"That cannot be helped. It's all mustard," said Mr. Buffum, waving the criticism on one side.

"Some makes it in an egg-cup and spoons it in."

"Foolish. Foolish. And most wasteful," said Mr. Buffum, frowning. "However . . ."

An idea occurred to him. He clad a long finger in the wet wash-rag, and worked the long finger carefully round the sides of the pot. Monnie looked at the Governor's earnest face as he carried out this delicate and ingenious operation, and the sight of it caused him to explode into startling laughter and to exclaim:

"We don't pay much money but we do see life."

"What do you mean, now?" asked Mr. Buffum, ruffled. "What's wrong with that, I should like to know?" And he held out the mustard-pot with much pride.

"Nothing wrong. Oh, nothin' at all! All the tastier, I should say!"

Mr. Buffum held the pot to his nose and sniffed like a connoisseur.

"It's perfectly all right," he assured his critic, and to change the subject he remarked: "I'm glad its been such a fine day for your mother and Mrs. Eliza."

"Lor'. Yes," laughed the boy. "But they haven't half missed something." He became suddenly serious to say, "I'm going to give Miss Lucia's car a thorough clean first thing to-morrow: it only gets a lick and a promise at that London garraige," and took himself off as abruptly as he had brought himself in.

Up at six: by nine o'clock the car would be looking shining and spotless, Mr. Buffum knew, and did not wonder very long why his own amateur efforts at "work" in the house or garden were a constant source of amusement to the expert of either sex, and even to the expert's child. Their attitude was a little galling

at times but very wholesome for any undue conceit of himself. Perhaps it was wiser to leave it alone and assume superiority by simply paying for the work to be done, which he could never hope to do more than bungle at himself. However, he could lay a fire with any man or woman living: yes, and mix a salad.

Well, his preparations were complete. He had only to wait for the girls' arrival. And as he waited he refused to think that even for a moment he had been silly enough to imagine a proposal that Marion should join her life with his, merely because her presence gave him delight.

All by himself, he dared to suppose that young people nowadays treated the communion between man and woman with ease and flippancy, not because they were unaware of its majesty, but because they were in their hearts terrified of it. Lack of reverence was due to ignorance.

Deep in hazardous imaginings of what human beings might make of their lives, if they tried to understand one another, he lost the sense of time, and while he watched the clock for their arrival, they took him unawares, the corks of the wine undrawn, the wine-glasses unpolished. Fine thoughts have hindered other even more important activities; they may, nevertheless, be worth harbouring.

For as Niece Lucia and Miss Marion came hurrying in, laughing and flushed with colour from the drive, they appeared to his eye as something more than nice friendly girls; he caught by way of their laughing faces a glimpse of what womanhood is; a glimpse which reassured him in his faith, and should no doubt have put him at quite superior ease. However, it failed to do so. On the contrary, he sat mumchance and grinning, hardly able to utter the commonplaces of wel-

come ; and he was thankful when they ran off to change their frocks and he could set about opening the wine, polishing the glasses and mixing the salad. It was good to have something actual upon which to concentrate, a trivial job to do. Trivial ? The preparations for a feast ! Ah, how good the little tiny things of life could become !

Happiness danced within him.

And Miss Marion came down wearing his favourite dress of mauve and silver. And Niece Lucia was late.

This happy accident affected Mr. Buffum in his present mood most strangely. He had the agreeable but odd sensation of having spent a very long time (far longer than could be rightly measured by mere days and weeks) with Marion, and that Niece Lucia was at length paying them a visit.

Their inner life was open to each other, like books which they could read together with understanding and appreciation. Her help revealed the meaning of difficult passages which alone he could not interpret : his help made clear to her much that had been dark. The book of life is meaningless to any human being in isolation ; it obtains meaning in so far as he gains corroboration by sympathy. . . .

At that instant, in his slow pacing of the room, he caught a vivid glimpse of his own face in a mirror : the sight was a violent jar, like missing a top stair and landing at the bottom without using feet. But no bones were broken.

He heard Miss Marion's voice say : " It is always so peaceful here. I like the way you never start chattering. You make a person feel welcome without needing the usual words."

" There was something I particularly wanted to ask you." Mr. Buffum began with great earnestness (and

an imp's whisper within said distinctly, "It would be so nice if you'd marry me. Would you?"): "What was it, now? Yes. Yes. I remember. Do you like a salad properly mixed or do you prefer to add stuff from a bottle—cream or mayonnaise?"

"Mixed," replied Marion without any hesitation, "when it's absolutely right. But the cream's safer and less bother. Most people use far too much oil."

"Ah!" said Mr. Buffum, taken aback that a young woman should know her mind with precision on such a matter. Was no field left in which a man could move with masculine superiority? He remembered with a pang how his own father had always mixed the salads, and it was assumed without question that anyone who did not like his mixing was a poor creature who did not know what was good. He was sharply shocked as only a little thing can shock us, and for some reason which he made no attempt to understand, he was delighted, though he definitely prided himself on his salads, and was fussy about the quality of the oil used.

He felt immensely happy. The poise of her head was good, well built to the neck and shoulders; and the varying quick expressions that ran over her small face a man must be alert to appreciate. He said:

"I like having the whole place all to ourselves."

"Fun!" she laughed.

"Eliza has such a poor opinion of me that she refused to go when she heard you were coming. I never heard of such nonsense. Lucia is a long time changing her frock."

"She has some plan."

Mr. Buffum started. "Some plan?"

"She'll tell you," Marion smiled.

These young people brought out the most surprising things with perfect ease. Something about "playing

gooseberry " in Niece's letter flashed through his mind —perturbing him. What can these two girls have been saying about him ?

Did they discuss him alone together with the terrible shrewdness they showed when he had heard them discussing young men of their acquaintance ? They probably did. He grew hot all over. Did those clear young eyes read his secrets like a book in large type ?

" Ah, a plan," he murmured.

" Oh, nothing very awful ! " Marion smiled, calmly regarding him.

If they read him, they read him. That was their lookout. Nothing to upset him. He could not be other than himself. What did it matter ? There was no reason whatever to feel shy and awkward as a schoolboy in the head master's drawing-room taking tea with the head master's wife. No reason whatever. None. Such feelings were the limit of absurdity in a grown man.

Nevertheless, such exactly were Mr. Buffum's feelings, ruling reason. In came Niece, unhurried and determined, not wearing an evening-frock but a long outdoor coat and a hat, buttoning on her gloves. She calmly asked :

" What time does Eliza get back from her outing ? "

" They reach the village at ten-fifteen," answered Mr. Buffum, staring.

" Good. I'll pick them up on the way back."

" On the way back ? " murmured Mr. Buffum.

" Yes, dear. I want to dodge up an article about a folk-dancing show in Arundel."

" But why didn't you mention it ? We could have all gone ! " he cried.

" That's exactly why I didn't. No need to drag

you both along. Why pretend you won't love a quiet evening alone with Marion, Old Man?"

"I don't. But . . ."

"Oh, I know you like your plans all thought out weeks beforehand. Well, here's a plan that isn't. It's no good being angry."

"I'm not angry," Mr. Buffum insisted; but Niece went coolly on as though he had not spoken:

"It's much pleasanter being alone sometimes with a person one's fond of." Something in the clear matter-of-fact statement of this simple truth completely took Mr. Buffum's breath away. In the world in which he had grown up only engaged couples were ostentatiously left alone together, so now the world in which he had grown up collapsed.

He smiled and blinked and said "Ah!"

And heard Miss Marion say: "Quite one of your best plans, darling."

Lucia put a hand on Marion's head and said:

"He's shy as a skinned eel now, poor dear. But he won't remain so long with you."

She went to the door and opened it. Then turned and saying, "Good-bye, children!" was gone.

Mr. Buffum seemed to be left standing an infinity of time on the hearthrug with a fixed smile stuck fast on his face—not more than two or three seconds as the clock ticks. Then he laughed aloud, and said:

"Well, I'm dashed! Well, I *am* dashed! You two young people! Having completely upset all my arrangements for the whole evening, I suppose we'd better go and have some supper."

"Yes. Do let's!" said Marion, rising.

Half-way to the door Mr. Buffum stopped abruptly: "That absurd child! She's had nothing to eat."

" A large crust of bread, a portion of cream-cheese and a glass of beer. She washed up the glass."

" Oh, she washed up the glass. I'm glad she washed up the glass."

And most surprisingly and suddenly he went off into silent laughter, from which he recovered to say : " Excuse my smiling. But it really all is too deliciously topsy-turvy. Are you quite sure that she washed up her glass ? Auntie discreetly leaving her little friends alone."

" She is a very dear child," said Marion. She managed to convey in her tone the gentlest reprimand for his hilarity, and also a reminder that she was a woman, a good six years older than Niece. But the remark tickled Mr. Buffum's nervousness, as the reference to age seemed to emphasize what struck him as the topsy-turvyness of the situation. His own chief avuncular wish was to hover in the background and help the young people by any means in his power to have a better time. He felt as much at ease as an old actor who finds himself on the stage somehow expected to play, not his own part, but another's for which he was not even dressed.

In the dining-room Miss Marion cleared away the third place he had so carefully laid and with it cleared away the last shadow of help he hoped for from Niece's company.

" I'm superstitious about an empty place," she said.

" So am I," Mr. Buffum agreed, but could not be explicit why.

A chunk of cold salmon : bunches of leafy lettuce : a chicken : his feast looked poor and meagre to the eye of his extreme shyness. Not even the support of Eliza in and out of the kitchen, waiting on them. It was a

desperate business. He heard Marion's calm voice speaking. She said:

"Do mix the salad. I believe you're a dab at mixing a salad."

"I really couldn't dream of it!" he hurriedly replied.

"Don't dream of it. Do it," she urged.

He could only shake his head, a faint fixed grin on his face.

And then his self-consciousness played him a really nasty trick. It showed him with horrid distinctness the true reason why Miss Marion was at such complete ease in his company. He counted not at all as a man. She minded as little being alone with him as with a maiden aunt. He was no dashing young fellow, superbly, dangerously male. He was just in their eyes a dear old fogey—innocent and safe.

Ha! Was he, though! Was he! Perhaps he'd show 'em. Perhaps he wasn't quite such a nincompoop as they thought him.

Poor fellow! Such silly thoughts have been known to run through wiser heads than his. They have even led to action. Happily they led in Mr. Buffum's case to no effect more serious than the shaking of the hand that offered her the bottle of salad cream, which she took, saying with a smile:

"I would like to have tasted a salad mixed by you."

That was the last trick self-consciousness played him: with that he touched the limit of its absurdity. For his obstinate neck was somehow forced round to look at Miss Marion, and he saw that she was pleased to be with him, simply pleased to be with a dear person whom she was glad of a chance to know better. So very simple. He forgot the odious image of himself that leered from the looking-glass; he forgot the horrid shape and voice he was so sick of carrying for ever

round—he forgot himself. The weight of the Past fell away: fear of the Future vanished: he lived in the Present. He felt no special age: no special sex: enjoyed merely a quickness of mind, an ease of speech, an unembarrassed awareness of the woman he talked with and listened to and occasionally touched. He was sure that she was interested in what he said and understood it. Words had somehow their full meaning and laughter somehow its full delight.

He lived in the Present and found it timeless and ageless. Indeed he lost all sense of time (and with it of age) so completely that when Niece returned at a quarter to eleven he could not believe that three hours had passed like three minutes or (he rubbed his eyes to realize) like three years.

"Well!" she said with mischief in her eyes. "Have you forgiven me for my outrageous plan?"

"I never said . . ." Mr. Buffum began.

"You said nothing, Old Man," Niece interrupted. "But don't tell me you weren't furious at having all your private little arrangements upset."

"Have it your own way," he agreed, thankful that she had chosen to describe his state of mind as *fury* rather than, with greater accuracy, as *fright*.

"Besides, you had to have a lesson."

"A lesson?" Mr. Buffum repeated, baffled.

"Yes, a lesson! Not always to be so funny about *me* liking to have what you call boy-friends. You're every bit as bad."

Mr. Buffum mumbled something inaudible. He was anxious not to raise an argument, or to disturb in any way his happy sense of freedom.

"Yes, and another thing. Perhaps you'll understand it's possible to have a lovely time with a person without ever thinking at all of wanting to marry them."

"Oh, yes. Of course not. Of course," Mr. Buffum hastened to agree.

"Wouldn't you now think me an impertinent little wretch if I'd come stealing in discreetly with *Bless you, my children!* oozing and dripping from every pore?"

"Yes; oh, yes, of course," he hurriedly said, thankful to goodness that nobody *could* read another's mind exactly.

"Well, then!" she said, as though deciding the matter. But her bald statements decided nothing at all for Mr. Buffum.

"Tell me about the folk dancing," he suggested hopefully. "Did you find material for an article?"

Niece looked at him and shook her head.

Marion, who had not felt called upon to interrupt the little family tilt, now put in her word.

"He's been such a perfect dear. You mustn't tease him any more."

"Teasing him!" Lucia burst out like a small explosion. "I'm trying to knock a grain of sense into his iniquitous old head."

"Planting seeds with a hammer!" laughed Marion.

Poor Mr. Buffum's mind could not regain steadiness, swinging from the extremes of giddy elation to guilt. Niece probed and touched what Uncle's experience had left secret and confused. He had never enjoyed a time with another human being so much as he had enjoyed the three hours with Marion. The child's wish to perpetuate those three hours through life fought the feeling that the essence of his delight lay in something that could not be commanded—or turned on like the hot-water tap for his convenience. Yet, was it right to be so happy? And if he really cared, why should he shrink from changing all the circumstances of both their lives? He ought to make a stand for his own

idea of fitness: not just let things slide according to the whim of a mere girl, whom it was his business to guide. He had reached man's estate, and must behave in a manner befitting manhood which no chit of girl could possibly understand.

He drew himself up in obedience to this steadying thought and would at once have begun to act on it, quietly, of course, and without presumption, but at that very moment he was attacked, most unfortunately, by a nasty little bout of hiccoughs. The first hiccough passed unnoticed: the second elicited a word of sympathy. "Bad luck, Old Man!" The third advice: to hold his breath.

"How silly!" Mr. Buffum commented with truth, when, after a long minute's taut stillness, the small convulsion recurred with unabated vigour. They watched and waited and it came, exerting a strange fascination to the exclusion of other interests.

Niece rushed at him suddenly and shouted, "Boh!" as some think that shock is a sovereign remedy for this ailment. But it took no effect whatever: perhaps the patient was too used to being shocked by Niece.

The tiny seizure continued to shake him at regular intervals, until Marion suggested that Lucia should fetch a glass of water—but when she came back with it the attack had already passed with the mysterious suddenness of its coming.

"There you are, Old Man!" said Niece, drinking the water. "You can't even have the hiccoughs without being provoking. I'm going to bed. Good night!"

And she was gone.

Oddly enough, the slight lateness of the hour increased sharply Mr. Buffum's prickly discomfort, but

again the magic happened and he knew the delight known only to the very shy man when he becomes sensitive, not to his grotesque self but to the presence of the other. He was drawn within the pleasant circle of her liking and appreciation : and in this atmosphere of what Methodists call liberty, he was quite clear in thought and speech on all those secret matters which Niece's bald statements had stirred to confusion. For their talk began with Marion speaking of Lucia, her youngness, her directness, her staunchness, her sense of fun, her power to appreciate the other fellow. Mr. Buffum glowed with pleasure : for one thing, he had never heard one woman, young or old, speak with such warmth and insight of another ; it was a novel and refreshing experience, all the more so as the appreciation was mutual. He savoured it with relish, as a connoisseur savours an exquisite vintage.

Laughing, they agreed that blunt avowals and mighty claims between two people were clumsy and ridiculous compared with the gradual growth of trust and understanding—that delicate, delightful process. And so on. And so on. She spoke happily and openly to him : he spoke openly and happily to her.

And again, of course, the minutes ticked by unobserved, and it was by accident that Mr. Buffum's eye saw the clock's face and his mind registered the actual hour, which was to him an unheard-of, an incredible hour, to be sitting up with any friend. He stared, startled. The hands pointed to ten minutes past two.

On the instant he visualized his terrible sister entering the room : saw the look of angry scorn on her face : heard her scathing voice : and all the rueful neighbours, all the friends and directors of his youth, the whole world of mocking cold critics, entered with her and pointed at him. Host in his own house, too.

Mr. Buffum rose, quailing.

"Look at the time," he said in a weak voice.

Marion jumped up. "Good gracious!" she cried. "I am sorry. Fancy my keeping you up like this!"

Her assumption of the blame increased his sense of guilt, the existence even of which she did not realize at all. She was accustomed to late hours. He was not. Quite simple to her. She was sorry and said so. That was all.

It was not all to Mr. Buffum. It was too tremendously new to him. He felt that some amends must be made. What amends could a man make, who was serious and not light-hearted? What amends but the one? He slid down the hill at a terrific pace.

"Oh, before we go," he began and faltered. The room was full of spectral presences, some approving slyly, others approving unctuously, all approving most distastefully: but he must do the right thing. He struggled on: "Before we go. There's one thing I feel I ought to say. I mean, I *want* to say. If you don't mind. That is . . . there is a question I want to ask." He stopped, unable to proceed. She was not listening with great attention to his words. She took hold of his hand and held it and said simply:

"It's been so lovely. I have come to know you so much better."

Her remark acted like some ju-jitsu trick and threw him. What he desired to say seemed more fatuous and impossible than ever and yet more necessary to be said. He fought on from old habit of mind.

"What I mean is. I have long wanted to know. Perhaps you could tell me?"

His mind became a fantastic blur. He walked across the room and back again. He felt queer as though he had been taking gas at the dentist's, and he was coming

to or going off. He pressed his temples, then blinked and brightened and said :

" Oh, yes. I have it. It's not of any importance. It always slips my mind. But can you tell me ? Those glass milk-bottles they leave at the door. The little cardboard discs. Is there any way of removing them without splashing oneself with milk from top to toe ? "

" Yes," she said. " There's a kind of instrument—sort of twirly little hook. Most handy. I'll send you one."

She stretched and sighed and said regretfully : " I suppose we had better turn in ! "

" I think it would be wise," he agreed, and, stooping, kissed her hands.

" It all comes back to this," she began earnestly. " If only human beings could be simple enough . . ." She broke off laughing. " Oh, well ! I mustn't start it all over again. . . . To be continued in our next ! "

Mr. Buffum laughed happily.

" To be continued in our next ! " he repeated, and she put her arms round his neck and kissed him good night.

CHAPTER XII

MR. BUFFUM GETS PUT INTO HIS PLACE

"WHAT are we to do about it?" Niece Lucia asked Marion, her friend, in troubled perplexity. "The old man will be a lost soul without Monnie's father and mother. Simply a lost soul."

"I know," Marion agreed. "We must do something. They've only just bought Hurston Hall. Won't be living there till next summer."

Sad silence brooded over the friends, whose faces puckered in thought.

The bad news Marion brought was that Samuelson—the great Albert Samuelson, of Samuelson & Samuelson, had purchased Hurston Hall, a large place in Mr. Buffum's neighbourhood, and had decided to engage Ben, Monnie's father, as head-gardener. Ben had beaten him at a Sutton rose show and Samuelson, running across Ben at various other flower shows, had taken one of his violent fancies to him.

"What's he want with another place, anyhow?" said Lucia bitterly. "He's got three already."

"They've given up their place on the river."

A vicious snort, then again sad silence which the suddenness of Lucia's interruption burst like a paper bag.

"Uncle's such a fatuous old donkey he'd push Ben into the job—for his good. And I believe Ben would be wretched for all his money and greenhouses and potting sheds and men under him and all that the heart of any gardener could dream of or hope for."

Marion laughed, somewhat sceptically.

" You trip a bit at the end, don't you ? "

A face of angry question was turned to her.

" Truth will out ! " Marion explained.

" I wish you'd had the gumption to say at once that Ben was a dipsomaniac or something. Then we should have heard no more about it ! "

" I never thought of that ! I might have thrown out lurid hints, but I concentrated on keeping quiet about the old man, so that he would not get pestered by the Samuelsons."

Into Lucia's morose gloom she dropped the gentlest of suggestions.

" It is possible to get another gardener, you know. And gardeners are a very nice race of men."

But Lucia snapped out, " That's just it. He's not like a gardener. He's a friend. I've never seen anything like it before. I can't be clear about it. Uncle loves being with him, doing jobs with him, talking with him. Loves quarrelling with him. He'll just "—she paused : then brought out with emphasis heavy as a groan—" miss him."

" The old man is wonderful," said Marion in a soothing voice. " He once told me that Ben was a great gentleman disguised as a working man."

" Ah ! he meant it, too," Lucia rapped out, unwilling to be soothed, angry that she could not make Marion feel the strange bond that linked the two men. She tilted her head back to add: "And I agree with him, now. I understand exactly what he means : and it's true."

She sank back into gloom. " We don't even know whether he'll be able to keep young Monnie. Where would he sleep ? And the new people would be certain not to get on with Eliza." She smiled a woe-begone smile : " Sorry. But he's such an old lamb ! "

"Well! we won't forebode evil. Ben's not gone yet. You'll be with the old man to-morrow, and you can see that he's not too quixotic. I say, do you know what makes the old man so rare and strange, so different?"

"What do you mean exactly?"

"Well, what other man do you know of his age that's still capable of strong affection?"

Lucia ceased to be gloomy: she looked interested and pleased.

"I'd never thought of it like that," she said. "That *is* the secret of him!"

"People have become like bad habits round most men of his age—which they can neither break from nor be reconciled to."

Lucia snapped gay fingers, brisk and defiant: "Deuce take the beastly world, why should affection be so rare?"

* * * * *

Meanwhile Mr. Buffum was not quite coming up to the scratch—the high scratch or the deep scratch of his young friends' warm appreciation. He had fallen far below the high standard suggested by their little encomium. He awoke as the noblest have been known to do, cross. There was only one side on which he could get out of his bed and that was the wrong one. To make matters worse it was a sunny still morning whose beauty he saw but could not feel. He behaved of course with perfect propriety, pointing out in the kindliest manner that the toast was tough, the bacon salt and the tea slightly overdrawn: so it was a shock to have Eliza look him up and down and ask seriously and firmly and without any malice: "Are you sickenin' for something, then?" He forgave her instantly for the wish to saddle him with her delinquencies and answered with a smile: "Not that I am aware of, thank you!"

He had hardly put his nose outside the door to draw in spiritual refreshment from the beauty of the morning, when Monnie dashed up to him, startling him unpleasantly :

" I say, Gov'nor," the imp shouted, excited. " Dad's caught the biggest mole ever. Come and have a look."

Fancy being expected to gloat over the corpse of a dead animal on such a morning—a mole too, *nature's mute monk. Live mandrake of the soil*—as Coleridge said. But not for a moment did his virtue forsake him.

" No, Monnie ! " he said. " Thank you very much. I'm sure your father will be very pleased ; the poor little creature was doing great harm to his seedlings."

Monnie stared at him, and sloped off abashed without a word, as though a pail of water had been poured over his young ardour.

" Sulky little beast ! " thought Mr. Buffum ; " just because I don't wish to begin the day by inspecting a dead animal, he can't even be civil. Preposterous ! Why should I do everything an absurd boy wants ? "

An unanswerable question, of course.

Virtue took him out for a good brisk walk, and took his temper with him. He was not a man to mope and idle. But virtue took him a little too far : he came back hot and tired instead of refreshed and invigorated. At lunch Eliza's eyes inquired into him in a way he did not like at all, and he liked it even less when she announced that in her thinking he ought to take a proper rest in the afternoon.

Because the woman had nursed him efficiently when he had the influenza, was that any reason why she should perpetually fuss over him like an old hen, clucking ?

Another unanswerable question.

He decided instantly to start chopping down bracken

and undergrowth with a swop-hook in the wild part : what he wanted was not a rest but violent exercise to make him sweat.

Mr. Buffum fancied himself with a swop-hook and he certainly did use it less clumsily than when he first handled it : he was in no immediate danger of severing a finger or gashing his calf. But the slow smooth certainty with which Ben advanced into the tangled mass, never hurrying, never stopping, never going over the same ground, was not his. He did not quite know where to hit or how to hit : and much to Ben's amusement, he wasted time and strength in heaving cut heaps far back out of his way instead of twisting them quietly behind him.

Nevertheless Mr. Buffum, remembering his first efforts with a swop-hook, fancied himself in its use. On this particular occasion his fancy towered high, uplifted to tottering by an admixture of moral complaisance that he should be doing useful manual work at all. He saw himself in a fair light, labouring on the earth. One of God's own simple children—no doubt a refreshing spectacle, even an elevating one.

Upon this complaisance the voice of Ben broke, rudely disturbing : " Whatever sense there is in cluttering into it so how ! Looks like a bloomin' battlefield and you the silly 'ero. Blood on yer hands : blood and sweat on yer face. I never see such a sight ! "

Mr. Buffum, both startled and irritated, replied sharply : " I prefer to do it as I like ! "

Ben openly jeered : " Oh, have it yer own way ! Have it yer own way ! But you'd do twice the good with half the trouble if you set about it properly."

" Shut up ! Shut up ! I never pretended to be able to use a hook like you," Mr. Buffum called out over his shoulder, his bad temper sore as a bad boil. He slashed

at a long bramble and came near cutting an unwary hand, as he overhit himself. The clumsiness did not soothe him.

"Cooh! Look at that now," Ben jeered. "For any's sake be careful what you're at! Blow me if a bloomin' kid couldn't do it better."

"I say," said Mr. Buffum in icy fury, "just clear out. Do you mind? I can't stand being watched and jeered at."

"Oh, ah!" said Ben. "Sure thing. Turns me sick seein' you with that thing in yer 'and, the mad way you hacks round with it."

And he went slowly off, provocatively humming, and ostentatiously rustling the pages of the bulb catalogue, which he had brought for consultation, on the choice of bulbs for the following year. Mr. Buffum remembered too late the arrangement which had been made the day before; too late, to recover from his exhibition of temper.

Curse the fellow! He took a savage glee in putting him in the wrong: in being irritating.

Affection ill sorts with vanity, in any of us. The streak of vanity in Mr. Buffum was not large, but was swollen by his bad mood painfully. He became suddenly tired and very unhappy. As soon as horrible Ben had got clean away, he left off his job and dragged himself into the house, dejected and ashamed: while Ben, chuckling, made his slow way, to the cottage, where he informed his wife that the Governor wasn't half in a stink. "Fair blares out at me, he did: and me only havin' a game same as usual 'bout his swoppin'."

To him Mrs. Ben replied laughing: "Why, you can't leave him be when a blind man could see as his harness hasn't fit him all the whole day. But there! You men are all alike. Must be plaguin' someone. The poor old Gov'nor!" And she laughed again.

It is awkward to feel like a little boy and to be curbed by years and respectability from acting like a little boy. Had Mr. Buffum slapped Ben's face and had his own head well clouted in return, all would have passed off pleasantly. But such things cannot, of course, be with grown men. When a man of fifty feels at all he takes infinite pains to deck out his absurdities of feeling in decorousness and dignity.

"What a pity!" ruminated Mr. Buffum sadly. "Oh a thousand pities! That a man so fine in many ways as Ben should take pleasure in being so irritating."

And after he had taken his bath, was in clean clothes and felt better in body and mind, he ruminated more sadly still what a pity it was—oh a thousand and one pities!—that he himself should be so irritable, such a creature of moods, so irritable.

Tea he enjoyed, and was able to take the last step but one towards complete recovery, for he suddenly laughed out loud. "What an ass I am!" he thought with astonishing clarity. "Still, the old fool knows what an ass I am and won't mind."

And being Mr. Buffum—acting, so to speak, on the very Buffumness of Buffum—he decided to visit the cottage and announce this illuminatng discovery. And directly he had finished his tea he went. As he crossed the garden he looked a well-dressed, rather distinguished, alert gentleman of middle age, but there was that in him that resembled a small boy in disgrace propelled along by a large policeman's strong hand grasping the collar of his jacket. He was propelled straight through the back door into the kitchen where Ben and Mrs. Ben were finishing their teas, Monnie being absent on Boy Scout business. He closed the door and stood looking at Ben for a moment before he announced: "Sorry, I lost my wool."

" Ah ! I'm blowed if you didn't half snap my head off ! " Ben answered in what was meant to be a stern fierce voice, and he continued : " Nice time, too, to be comin' in for a cup o' tea. And if you think I'm goin' to let you have this place, you got took in. See." And he settled himself more firmly in the chair which having arms was usually kept for Mr. Buffum when he took tea in the cottage.

" If it comes to that," laughed Mr. Buffum, " I'd lug you out of it for tuppence." And he sat down in the arm-chair, away from the table.

" Nice way of going on. Pay no attention to *him*. He's an awful man," said Mrs. Ben, pouring him out a cup of tea.

" As a matter of fact I thought we might run through the bulb catalogue. I have brought the order form " : he produced it, and added defiantly : " also my fountain-pen "—having on a previous occasion found Ben's pen in the cottage scratchier than a pen in a post-office. There followed a pleasant party pouring over the fat catalogue on the kitchen table, which Mrs. Ben had cleared, and by which she sat, sewing. They ordered some extra fine hyacinth bulbs and 500 more tulips than they had ever run to before.

Mr. Buffum returned in a happy glow from the cottage, very keenly aware of what those two dear people meant in his life. And Niece Lucia was beginning to see Ben's real quality and appreciate them both. It made Mr. Buffum happy when people of whom he was fond were able to recognize each other. Ben and Niece Lucia, he reflected, were alike in their independence, and in their terrible outspokenness, though their vocabulary differed. Both stood on their human honesty, proudly like trees in the earth, a lithe young birch and a gnarled large oak—this slip of a

modern girl—this old countryman staunch in earth-lore.

Niece came soon after and very soon she blurted out what was to her the news of impending badness : Marion had learned from Miss Samuelson, whose miniature she had painted, that her father had taken Hurston Hall and that his horrid heart was set on having Ben for his head gardener.

The shock knocked Mr. Buffum straight over ; but he rose from the count quite convinced that it was the best news he had heard for a very long time. It would obviously be the making of Ben and his family : true, he would not see him quite so often : would miss him in the garden : but what was that compared with such a chance for Ben—with greenhouses and potting-sheds and men under him and such a position : really a chance for him to show his worth. It was absurd that a man like Ben should be running a little tinpot-show like his own. " He's such an obstinate old duffer, he may think he is not up to such responsible work : rubbish of course, rubbish. I shall have to see to that ! He's such a creature of habit, too, he may feel he doesn't want a change or some nonsense of that kind."

Niece growled a protest to this unselfish exuberance. " I can understand your not wanting to stand in his way, Old Man," she said. " But I'm bothered if I see why you should push him into Samuelson's arms. It's just silly : just quixotic. I shall beg him not to go."

" My dear girl," cried Mr. Buffum. " My dear girl. You must do no such thing."

" How long's he been with you ? "

" Ten years. Yes : it must be ten years ! "

" Well, I shall think less of him if he does go."

Mr. Buffum uttered a volley of expostulatory Tuts at her complete inability to see what he considered to be

the point, and he hurried out of the room—it was just before dinner—to ask Eliza would she mind going to the cottage with a message that he very much wanted to see Ben at 9.15 that evening.

Niece was furious. " I'd never have told you," she said, " if I thought you'd have been such an old idiot. You've no idea how you'll miss him."

Mr. Buffum looked at her. " I think I have," he said very quietly. " I think I have."

" It's one thing to stand in his way : it's quite another thing to push him off."

She continued her battery against his quixotic foolishness without avail ; and a sulky baffled Niece got up not at all prettily when Ben announced himself by a loud rap, on which he entered. She paused, searching her mind for an angry protest, but found nothing more explicit than a cross " Oh well ! " and flung out of the room. Ben pulled a face, and stood, holding his cap, by the shut door.

" Come in. Come in ! " Mr. Buffum called out from his chair by the fire.

Heavens ! how hateful changes were ! He seemed to see the man for the first time and with blazing clearness the man's place in his life, as Ben carried forward a high-backed chair, planted it firmly down and sat slowly, stiffly, on its edge.

He found it difficult to begin, very difficult.

" Got nothing better to do with your evening than upset that gal, I see," commented Ben pleasantly.

Mr. Buffum took no notice. Ben waited expectant, wondering whatever had caused the old Governor to send for him in this way : a thing he'd not done in all the years they had been together. " Summat's up, anyhow ! " he had remarked to Mrs. Ben : and now sat curious as to what that summat was.

"I've just had wonderful good news," Mr. Buffum said suddenly. "Wonderful good news. My niece tells me Samuelson has taken Hurston Hall."

He stopped as suddenly as he had begun.

"Lor Lumme! You don't say! Draggin' me through the garden at this time o' night to tell me that! Why I've known that days and weeks."

Ben leaned back and amiably hooted.

"Yes, but that's not all. My niece tells me what you could not possibly know and that is—Samuelson's dead keen to have you as head-gardener, and I'm dead keen that you should take the job on."

"Oh, you are, are you! That's good!" said Ben, and relapsed into himself, like a large turtle withdrawing.

"Listen to me! Men of our age are apt to get stuck, you know, in grooves. But this isn't a chance you must miss, Ben, for any foolish reasons. You might feel a little strange at first, but you would soon get used to the work and do it quite easily."

"Sure thing!" commented Ben. "Nothing *to* it. With all that money behind you!"

"Capital. You see you'd have a real chance there to show what you're made of. It's absurd for a man like you to stay pottering about a little one-eyed place like this. You'd never get rid of me, of course. I'd always come creepin' round to tea with you and Mrs. Ben. My chair in the cottage, you know. And there you'd be—men under you—greenhouses, potting-sheds."

"Yes. That's a proper place, that is. Acres of glass. Why the vegetable garden's bigger than all o' this 'ere. Wouldn't need to put yer hand to a spade no more. Ten men under yer and as much outside help as you wants and can get. And where we spend farthings

on stuff they spend fivers. Don't you make any mistake!"

He leaned back, nodding sagaciously. Mr. Buffum carried on the wave of enthusiasm, clinching the matter.

"So when an offer is made you, as it most certainly will, you must accept it."

Ben spoke casually: "Oh, an offer's been made all right."

Mr. Buffum started as though his face had been slapped.

"Oh! has it!" he said. "You've kept it pretty close."

"I ain't a talkative chap," said Ben, staring at the mantelpiece, unhelpfully.

Mr. Buffum pulled himself together with a great effort. He must endeavour not to be a sentimental old idiot, he assured himself with a quick pang. After all, a fellow who could lose his temper vilely as he had lost it that very morning and then go creeping round like a schoolboy to say he was sorry, did not deserve much consideration.

He waited hoping that Ben would tell him more: he hoped in vain. Ben sat inscrutably, immovably still. "That's all right," Mr. Buffum burst forth into the uncomfortable silence. "You do things your own way. That's your affair. But my goodness! I am glad. What a swell you'll be. Don't you think you'll be able to shake me off, tho'. Not a bit of it. Not a bit of it. And don't you ever forget the good times we've had together. Pickin' apples and you climbin' any old tree like some great monkey. And that pine stump we grubbed up. Do you remember? That bottle of beer went down as well as any I've tasted. Didn't it? Pretty well reached Australia on that job before we could shift him. Good times. Good times.

Very good times. But tell me all about it. Don't sit there like some old Mandarin nodding. Tell me."

Mr. Buffum sat back after this outburst, brooding on the aforementioned happy times.

"Sorry to disappoint you and all like that," said Ben at last with enormous quietness. "But I ain't goin' near no Samuelson."

"What's that?" he started up to ask.

"You ain't deaf, are yer, as well as silly?" Ben answered furiously. "I ain't goin' near no Samuelson."

"Why ever not? Isn't the offer good enough?"

"Too good if it comes to that!"

"It's absurd, my dear fellow. Absurd. Why ever aren't you going? You have a good offer. You know you could do the job. It's the chance of a lifetime. Besides, you have others to consider besides yourself—Mrs. Ben . . ."

Mr. Buffum was violently interrupted. "Hark at me! Hark at me! Did ever you hear such a blinkin' old hypercrite. How often have you said to me—*Money ain't everythin', Ben. Believe me. Money ain't 'appiness, Ben* (he mimicked atrociously a genteel manner of speech). Many and many and many's the time!"

"Nor is it, of course," Mr. Buffum answered angrily. "That's nothing to do with it. Why have you turned down this offer?"

"All right. All right. All right. No need to let your hair fly. I knows my own business." He stretched out a large brown hand and made the gesture of patting a small boy's head. "I happen not to like the bloke."

"Oh! but that's silly, Ben. Liking doesn't come into this affair. Why, you'll hardly see Samuelson from one week's end to another. Hardly as much as that."

"All right. All right. All right!" Ben repeated, with the same gesture. "I can run me own show! thanks all the same and many of 'em. *And* I don't hang on where I'm not wanted. Oh no! You needn't have no fears o' that. I've often thought I wouldn't mind doin' a bit o' market gardenin' and odd jobs on me own. Better life than dancin' attendance on a moody chap who doesn't know his own mind from one minute to the next."

Mr. Buffum felt that the tables were being rather unpleasantly turned.

"I was only speaking for your good."

There was an unpleasant taunt in Ben's ruthless laugh as he said: "In yer mind!" which made Mr. Buffum feel murderous: and cold fury froze him as Ben added, jeering: "You gets the truth from me: the truth, every time, and you don't like it."

Mr. Buffum burst out furiously: "The truth, you old beast. The truth is that the garden won't be the same without you about in it: I can't imagine enjoying the garden again without you about in it—though why that is so, I'm blowed if I know."

There was a silence, which Ben's voice at length penetrated gently in a very different tone:

"Don't talk so silly: a garden's a garden whatever chap's about in it."

Mr. Buffum snapped out: "That's not a point I care to argue. I know what I feel. That's final."

Again silence descended upon them.

Then Ben growled: "A coupla fools."

"What's that?" Mr. Buffum rattled out. Ben raised his voice near to an angry shout:

"A coupla fools, I says. Seems we're pretty much made of a piece. A coupla fools. The two of us."

"Oh damn you, Ben. Damn you." Mr. Buffum

weakly collapsed. "You ought to go to Samuelson's." And he could say no more. But when he found his voice again he managed with an effort to say: "I feel I'm getting in your way."

A kindly-voiced Ben reassured him:

"Of course you are, metty. Gettin' in me way. What else have you ever done? I could never learn yer. No sense, that is. But it comes to this. There's all sorts of fools in the world and you're the sort of fool a fool like me likes. Yes," he went on meditatively, "I'm a funny sort of chap in me likes and dislikes. There ain't no bounds to it."

"I don't know what to say to you, Ben."

"There's nothing to be said, metty, if it comes to that; not so far as I can see. We've both blowed off a bit!"

Niece Lucia's head appeared tentatively round the door. Neither man took any notice of her, which did not greatly appeal to her sense of fitness. So she closed the door and marched in, spoiling for any kind of fray.

She looked from one to the other:

"Well," she challenged.

A low voice came from Mr. Buffum's chair, in which its owner sat crumpled.

"Ben won't go to Samuelsons."

A snort came from Ben—who stiffened on his high-backed chair. Then he shook a sorrowful head.

"That old Uncle of yours, Miss Lucia! I thought you might do something with 'im—more'n I could ever do, though that ain't much. But he fair beats the band. Straight, he does that. Whatever do you think is his latest?"

"I haven't a notion," said Lucia, leaping to the uptake.

"After all these years; you'd hardly believe it, but

he wants to push me off on that Samuelson trash. 'Be the makin' of you, Ben,' he says. 'Be the makin' of yer.'"

He shook his head like a doctor at a hopeless case.

"No 'eart. Got a bloomin' great stone stead of a 'eart. Still there it is. He can't help 'isself."

"Yes," Lucia agreed. "It's terrible to have a person like that for a near relation."

"And of course it's all as plain as day to you and me or any sensible creature—he wants to get rid o' me so as he can start playin' the fool all by hisself in his old age without me to look after 'im. You look out, Miss Lucia, he'll be tryin' to do you in next. You mark my words. And him sitting there now without a word to say for hisself just as dumb ashamed of hisself as a nipper caught pinchin' apples."

Over all Lucia's modern brightness came pouring a cloud of feeling. She stood there with a bright smile fixed on her face and something choking her throat which she failed to swallow down. There sat Ben stiffly upright on the edge of his chair, staunchly unswervingly loyal to something rarely recognized, a man, sweet all through from head to toe. She must do something. What could she do? It was not suitable for a young lady to embrace a married gardener in the presence of an elderly relative, even though he happened to be in a state of momentary collapse. Oh wasn't it? Her head tilted up. She took three quick immediate steps forward, put warm arms round Ben's neck and kissed him again and again.

"You are an absolute darling. You are an absolute darling," she said. "So now you know."

Ben pulled out his handkerchief and worked it with elaborate care round under his high collar; then he

blew his nose and put the handkerchief carefully back into his pocket.

Looking straight at Lucia, he announced, shaking his head, in a soft voice:

"Dash my buttons! The cheek of some kids. Shan't half have a tale to tell my missus when I gets home, what with the pair of you. But as a matter of fact that's the sort I—*can—do—with*!"

He beamed emphasis on the last three words.

Then he rose and lifted his high-backed chair.

"Best be gettin' along home before it's too late," he said. "What about Uncle. Not half mad. I lay. Jealous. Sitting there as droopy miserable as some old blackbird out in the rain."

"Oh him!" laughed Lucia.

"Truth is he don't like bein' seen through: no, nor yet put into his place. Still we does it for his good, don't we, Miss Lucia?"

"Indeed: we do."

By this time he had put the chair also back into *its* place. With his hand on the doorknob, not stopping, he called out, "Good night. Happy dreams and all like that!" and was gone.

"What's the matter, Old Man?" Lucia asked at length as Mr. Buffum remained motionless in his chair.

"You're not ill, are you?"

"No. I am not ill."

Niece was standing rather defiantly upright in front of him.

"So your little plan to fob him off was a failure."

She got no response.

"Feel a bit small, I should hope."

No response. She dug on.

"You don't say much. You *said* nothing to him."

Came a murmur: "No need to!"

" You might at least have offered him a drink."

" Perhaps I might."

Mr. Buffum was rising—rising not only from his chair. He stood up, and laid firm hands on Niece's shoulders. His voice was level and clear and low, as he said :

" You thanked him for me. You responded for me. I have never known a kiss more beautifully bestowed."

Niece found herself trembling. She pushed him away crossly. " Don't get goopy, Old Man." She spoke in a tight little fretful way. " For heaven's sake, don't get goopy ! And I don't *bestow* kisses like pennies in a blind beggar's tin."

But Mr. Buffum continued unabashed, impenetrably sure of himself.

" It's beauty lay in its warmth and spontaneity."

Niece Lucia would not succumb, tremble as she stupidly might.

" Stop it now. Stop it," she cried, and hurried halfway across the room when she turned to hurl her last missile, sharpened with all her sauce. " Besides, you ought to be ashamed of yourself—encouraging a young girl to kiss your gardener. It's not done."

And she ran quickly from the room before she lost control of herself, leaving Uncle with a fatuous smile upon his happy face.

CHAPTER XIII

MR. BUFFUM FAILS AS A BUFFER

A GOOD deal because her friend Marion was in New York till April, Niece Lucia was spending ten days of her Christmas holidays with Mr. Buffum. Geoffrey Goodman—commonly known as G.G.—had come down from London on a two days' visit. George Upland, Marion's brother, was coming for the week-end. Geoffrey Goodman belonged to Class B—she informed her Uncle—with possibilities of promotion; for the Y.M.L.A. (or Young Men's Lucia Association) had been divided into Classes A, B and C, at Uncle's tentative suggestion, in order that he might not slip again into error so profound as he had slipped into with Bobbie—Bobbie Linthrop. Uncle had been scrutinized on suggestion that of course he understood that one day there would be somebody in a class by himself; and the steady silence of disapproval was at length broken by Niece remarking: "So much better not to regard them all as aspirants to my hand but simply as people I'm fond of." To which Mr. Buffum had hastily replied: "Certainly, dear. I'll endeavour to do so."

Mr. Buffum liked Geoffrey Goodman, a sensitive shy fellow with a blunt nose, a wide serious mouth and largish eyes given to twinkling. He was neat but not obtrusively neat; his thick hair, for instance, in rebellion against the way it was parted and asked to lie, looked well brushed but untidy: and Mr. Buffum quietly liked this very much.

At lunch on the day after G.G.'s arrival Niece Lucia announced that she had four letters to write before the post went, and Mr. Buffum felt a moment's pang of guilt that he did not instantly suggest that young Goodman should help him with his bonfire. He liked G.G. enough to feel that he *might* ask him : but not enough to be able to do so.

Mr. Buffum took delight in bonfires. They meant much to him. It was far more than the mere crude heaping of cut bracken, undergrowth, reeds, etc., into a toppling smouldering pile, which might or might not burn through, with the blunderer's assistance from paraffin or petrol. There was something ceremonial about his bonfires, and he took pains to stack the dry stuff, like tall bracken, in nice proportion to the wet stuff, each laid in carefully separated heaps after cutting.

The particular bonfire awaiting him called for special care. It would need a good foundation and very careful stacking, as the amount of wet reeds and wet grass was large. But there was also a good supply of dry bracken, and the whole lot could be burned by tea-time if the wet stuff were properly sprinkled over the flaming dry at the correct moment.

All this would be difficult to explain to a novice ; who, too, might conceivably be bored by a bonfire, though that seemed hardly credible to Mr. Buffum. And anyhow a bonfire was essentially a one-man job. No one wanted chatter or talk watching the smoke roll and billow away—or gazing in under the tilted pile at the effect of air on too heavily packed deadness ; or listening to the roar and crackle of the fire in full blast, or enjoying the pungent smell of green reeds burning.

No : some delights were incommunicable ; and the delight of a bonfire was incontrovertibly one of them :

even if there had been *two* long-handled five-pronged forks.

He murmured to Niece : " I've a little job to do in the garden, dear," and evaporated directly after lunch, thankful that no question had been put as to the nature of his job.

He donned an ancient jacket, old gloves and heavy hobnailed boots, and hurried to the woodshed for a trugfull of shavings and straw packings ; half a newspaper bulged from his side pocket. He liked to get it well started ; his pride was to let the whole conflagration depend upon one match and one only.

He found that old Ben, without saying anything, had put ready a pile of trimmings from the climbing roses, and several large rhododendron boughs, hacked to manageable size. Just like old Ben ! Exactly what was wanted to give body and substance to the fire.

Mr. Buffum chose the place, tipped out his kindling from the trug, stacked the driest bracken on the kindling with his long-handled prong, and on the bracken placed with careful hands the likeliest bits of rhododendron.

Then he knelt down, struck a match and touched her off. He held his breath to watch the little flame become on a puff of wind a sizzling crackling roar, eating into the tall heap, which slowly lowered before his eyes. No time to waste. He drove his prong into the rose-trimmings and swayed the load on to the fire, which licked into its fodder. Reeds and wet stuff to keep it down. Golly ! It'ud burn anything ! Three heavy prong-loads brought from heaps fifteen yards and more away, and he could wait a bit to watch the volumes of smoke billowing in quick rolling curves up and away.

Marvellous thing, fire ! All from one match, too. He inserted his prong and lifted it across his knee,

stooping, to let in air . . . watching in awe the busy flames at work, in musing awe the rolling smoke . . . till the wind eddied and brought the smoke thick and warm and pungent against his face. He moved round slowly, to become aware of young Goodman neither critical nor amused, but gazing like an initiate at the rolling smoke.

Mr. Buffum went and stood by him, leaning on his long prong. No word was spoken. Time to feed her with a good load of dry bracken and more rose-trimmings ; a rite which Mr. Buffum solemnly performed, returning to the admirably silent young man.

Then the young man spoke : and he spoke rightly, addressing no one, letting the words drift dreamily like smoke from his mouth. He said :

> "' I've friend over the sea.
> I like him but he loves me.'

Only I'm the friend . . . and she's here . . . and in the poem they were both men."

This was the sort of communication that Mr. Buffum most appreciated, as no immediate answer was required. A young man who quoted Robert Browning and could enter without the slightest jar into the true ruminant bonfire spirit seemed to Mr. Buffum quite amazingly eligible ; but he rapped down the idea as an impertinence. What after all did he know about a young girl's heart ? He let his gaze wander off with the rolling tall column of smoke, away and away. . . . A tongue of flame leaping through urged him to fetch a layer of green reeds and grass. He shook it lightly over : fetched another.

" Notice the smell of those reeds ! " he brooded aloud, and as easily went on ruminating aloud : " Something perhaps to care for somebody. Nobody can *marry* everybody."

These profound truths rolled off loose and vague into the air : not trite and senseless, as in the ordinary rat-tat smack-back habit of conversation, irritating and out of place like smoke in a room ; eye-stinging, lung-choking.

" I'm pretty certain she's in love with somebody else, as a matter of fact."

Mr. Buffum, gazing at the smoke, thought it wiser to let these words eddy and swirl completely away. The young man continued sadly :

" It was fairly easy going in the old days. You could at least offer 'em a home of their own—a change for the better usually from their parents' home : a bit more freedom, anyhow. But now . . . now . . . they live their own lives, earn their livings, do their jobs . . . what have you to offer 'em? Nothing. Nothing but your rotten self. It's awkward. And you've got to be so beastly explicit about your feelings."

Mr. Buffum stared into the smoke. His opinion that no difficulties existed for these free young people underwent revision. The difficulties had changed their character : that was all. He was amused to find that he, the old-fashioned, was offering support to modernity, as he murmured, more to the rolling smoke than to the young man beside him : " Aren't we—people—I mean—that is to say, men and women, trying to understand each other perhaps a little better, don't you think ? "

Mr. Buffum stacked on the remaining heaps, four good prong loads—into which the fire ate hugely, forcing up volumes and rolling volumes of billowing cloud-like smoke. He watched, fascinated. And through the smoke emerged the young man's words " Yes : there may be something in that." Though Mr. Buffum could not be sure *when* the words were

said, for his thought had caught the continuity of the smoke-cloud and words spread out from their tight context.

"Not just wedding bells or else nothing," pondered Mr. Buffum aloud. "We are beginning to realize the infinite delicate possibilities of human intercourse."

There was no fashion, old or new, in sadness. His heart went out to the young man: so much so, that he actually diverted his gaze from the fascination of the rolling smoke and looked in his direction. But the young man, admirable to the last, had silently withdrawn.

If life were only one long bonfire—of the passing moments, say, well-burned to light, nourishing, clean ash—no more eligible mate could be imagined than this most admirable young man, silent in approach, silent in withdrawal, and rightly communicative, claiming no fuss of answer.

Mr. Buffum busied himself with the last most fascinating task of a bonfire: the loosening of the packed tightness to give play to the flame. He shook out lumps pressed to an incredible flatness: a moment's pause and the fire took firmer hold so that he was obliged to retreat from its heat.

On these short winter afternoons the light faded early: and the glow of his fire shone more redly as it burnt itself out.

He came in to tea, his mind set for a party of agreeable melancholy, but he found his young friends uproariously gay: and remaining in the bonfire mood, he smiled to imagine that perhaps more rubbish than bracken and wet reeds had been consumed during the afternoon.

Niece led a ribald attack on his ridiculous passion for bonfires: he was merely indulging a little boy's

longing to play with fire—pent-up naughtiness emerging after forty years and more repression. All rubbish that he thought great fire-worshipping thoughts on fire's metaphorical—metaphysical—meta . . . oh, he never met a meaning. What sense there was was malice, pure malice. Horrible. Mephistopheles, complete with cloven hoof and tail, running his horrid prong into the poor souls of those he hated and thrusting them into the flames. And who would think to look at his benevolent countenance as he demurely munched hot muffins (bagging more than his share at that) that beneath this kindly elderly normal surface lurked a perverted Sadist?

And the admirable young man, his brooding melancholy forgotten, rocked with laughter and egged her delightedly on.

Indeed for the rest of his stay the mood of gaiety happily persisted, of which Mr. Buffum, though a trifle bewildered, was very glad. His bewilderment did not afflict him at all, because he found the surprisingness of people he was fond of a constant source of pleasure. And that was fortunate, for his bewilderment was much increased on the evening after the young man's afternoon departure, by finding a very solemn and a very grateful Niece, who treated him with an almost alarmingly surprising deference and respect. It was in the air, vaguely in danger of becoming oppressive, all through dinner. It became embarrassingly vocal after dinner, when they were sitting peacefully in the study.

"What did you say to G.G., old man?" she began. "He quite changed."

"Who? Me?" Mr. Buffum hastily demurred. "Oh nothing. Nothing at all."

"Oh!" she said. "He seemed to think you did. You see it was like this. We were quite good pals.

Keen on the same sort of books. He dances very well, too. Then all the fun went out of him: he became gloomy and dull, and when I asked him what was the matter, he said in a sepulchral voice at last, 'Oh, I've fallen in love with you.' Pretty feeble, you know, when you come to think of it; and not too frightfully flattering."

"Ah!" said Mr. Buffum, and waited.

"All that covered about a year since I've known him," Niece explained, and looked steadily at Uncle as though some pronouncement were expected from him. He moved uneasily in his chair.

"Any foolishness," he stammered. "I mean . . . under these circumstances any *silliness* . . . I feel myself so capable of any absurdity, of any arrant absurdity . . . you must forgive my being quite guiltily sympathetic with any man. . . ."

He dried up under the penetrating gaze of young Niece.

Her hard young voice enunciated clearly: "Then you don't think feeling might quicken intelligence."

"I'm sure it should do. I'm sure it's meant to. But . . . forgive me . . . it's not quite so simple and straightforward as some people suppose. Oh, I'm not differing from you . . . I know there is no love without understanding. I know it quite well. But for all that . . . I've felt I could lie down and howl if I mightn't . . . mightn't hold a person's hand, say. Senseless, of course. Silly. Reasonless. But it is so. And when that dear young man . . ."

He stopped suddenly. Niece never took her eyes off him. He waved his hand, smiling as though to dispel the mesmeric influence of her young stare.

"Mustn't do it. Mustn't thus drag forth shy secrets." He laughed. "But I sometimes think that

if a man has the courage to realize what a complete baby he is, there are hopes that he may become something else as well."

Tears came into her eyes. She kneeled by his side, holding his arms.

"You don't think me just a cheap sort of horrid little person, do you?"

"No," said Mr. Buffum. "I do not."

She sighed and sat back in her chair, stretching out her leg to push a log with her shoe.

"A poker is the last thing that shoe's daintiness is meant for," remarked Mr. Buffum.

"Oh! if you're careful," she said. "Tell me about G.G. You got *him* all right."

Mr. Buffum rubbed his hands together.

"Oh! it was the bonfire, really. That's what it was. The bonfire. Soothing, revealing things, bonfires. A nice young man. I like him. I'm glad he got cheered up."

"Do you think it's beastly of me to keep him dangling about, when I know I shall never marry him?"

"I don't consider you do keep him dangling about."

"It pretty well amounts to that, doesn't it?"

Mr. Buffum shook his head.

"Put it into words, Old Man."

"Well. I think you give him a great deal. I think you have a great sense of the other fellow."

"I like to think so. But I like him to be in love with me, you know. It's most awfully satisfactory. Do you think I oughtn't to?"

"I really don't know. I really couldn't say." He leaned back to laugh silently, and still leaning back he said to the ceiling: "You are a rogue, of course; you are a complete rogue. But I am too happy to have you talk to me like this to mind. As long as a person

is aware of what they are doing . . . You're dear and warm-hearted: not cold and selfish and calculating. Any man, young or old, would be the better for knowing you."

"Rub it in, darling. Rub it in. I can't have too much of it. But what about meal ways shocking you?"

"Oh, you do that right enough. Perhaps I've been shocked to some purpose. I'm not quite blind."

And with odd distinctness the words of the young man G.G., allowed, when spoken, to roll off with the smoke into the large surrounding air, passed through his mind—"I'm pretty certain she's in love with somebody else"—and his mind corroborated the statement, though without the gloom of the statement's maker.

In the atmosphere of affection which of us has not been aware of somehow knowing more than words tell us—as though some invisible prawn's whisker informed us what was happening in another's mind? In this way Mr. Buffum was aware of what Niece Lucia was beginning to tell him when she said:

"You think I'm utterly sure of myself. I'm not. I'm not a bit. Not where it most matters."

He waited. She kept staring at the fire.

"You see, I care for George. Oh! fearfully. About twenty times more than he cares for me. I'm frightened. There's no idiocy I wouldn't do. I'd crawl to him. Oh Lord! I've no pride. No decency. Nothing. Not really. Though of course I behave as though I didn't care two pins about him. But if it goes on much longer I can't bear it. And if there is a thing on this earth I loathe it is an hysterical sort of hopeless woman."

On which the proud young girl lost control of herself and burst into tears. Mr. Buffum was intensely moved, not only in sheer sympathy at her sharp dis-

tress, but also by the trust which enabled her to be thus explicit—even terribly explicit—to himself. Yet through his mind scuttled the hard little incongruous thought: "Ah! the biter bit!"

Niece smiled and wiped her eyes, and went on: "You see, I nursed him two nights. I had to. It's too miserable being alone with a temperature and I know a lot about nursing. And anyhow I wanted to. And it wasn't fair in a way. I had to be so dreadfully *sensible*!—all matter-of-fact—a nurse. And ever since he's been a perfect lamb, but he's treated me like a sort of lay sister. I daresay it's my fault, but when once you have been on practical sensible lines—no nonsense, you know—it's terribly difficult to change the step, you understand; to stop the rot."

Much to Mr. Buffum's chagrin, her dear little face suddenly puckered like a baby's about to cry, and before the tears came she added hastily, brokenly: "He's . . . he's kissed me like a brother, ever since."

Mr. Buffum held the wrist of the hand that hid her face: said nothing: thought: "These young people . . . they do have their heartaches like us, then. The poor child's pitiful—and absurd, too, oh, deliciously!" And he thought again, as on the previous day: "There is no fashion, old or new, in sadness. Perhaps she's a little more definite. But that's about all." She stroked his hand, a sign of recovery. He ventured to suggest ever so gently that possibly she might manœuvre a change in the nature of the caress.

She jumped as though stung by a bee.

"You don't suppose I'm going to throw myself at his head, do you? Sort of sink into his arms in a swoon. Oh good Lord! No! but all this fearful friendliness does make things difficult . . . if you're out to play the game. And I am out to play the

game. Which suddenly becoming the little feminine thing isn't part of it. Oh no! Man to man, play straight and Heaven help your feelings!"

It passed through Mr. Buffum's mind very distinctly that he could bear not to be merely her devoted Uncle. But then as a strange young man, would he have the gumption to know her? He doubted it. He swerved from this line of thought to state most seriously: "I shouldn't mind if you did get engaged to be married."

Niece Lucia lifted a tear-stained face to eye him: and, in spite of her forlornness, laughter was obliged to come:

"Oh, wouldn't you! About time I settled down, eh? Got safely married and all that. I know."

"No, I wasn't meaning that," Mr. Buffum objected. "Or anything like it."

"What were you meaning, then?"

"I was speaking from my point of view; quite selfishly."

"Sorry, Old Man. I'm not there."

"I don't feel I should lose you, now. Get left out. Excluded."

He spoke dreamily, not noticing Lucia sit back to wave front paws angrily, not hearing her stuttered protest: "Oh, you thought that, did you!" which he blandly interrupted, continuing dreamily. "A rare gift. A very rare and a very lovely gift. To be able to bring another into our happiness. The wish to share happiness."

Even rarer perhaps, owing to envy's poisonous pervasiveness, for anyone to be able to enjoy another's happiness. But Mr. Buffum did not mention that or think of it. Niece Lucia did: or rather sensed it, as one senses the pervading fragrance on first looking out of window on a warm spring morning, early.

Her front paws lowered and loosened: protest and

challenge departed: she knitted her little hands together, fingers slowly interlaced, and throwing her small head back said in a strange, low, exalted voice, like a prayer or a thanksgiving: "Oh dear God! There are good things in the world."

And then the funny spell had to be broken. Too much of it. Too *much* of it. She jumped up, stretched out her arms, snapped her fingers.

"A cigarette!" she cried out. "A cigarette! For goodness' sake!"

She lighted one and puffed luxuriously.

"Married. Me. Oh, never on your life! I'll be a nice little wiry old spinster. Wiry and wary. And worry myself weary with good works and knitting. And join the great league to discountenance spitting. And not utter a word that's not utterly fitting."

"Idiot!" smiled Mr. Buffum. "I was unaware you were a poet."

"'Many a flower is born to blush unseen,'" she quoted gaily; then wagged her finger at him to add:

"'No girl should be too proper,
For fear she come a cropper.'

But I must go and powder my awful nose. You have a villainous effect upon a young girl, Uncle. I must be looking like the broken doll on the rubbish heap, so streaky and dishevelled."

And out of the room she whisked, leaving Mr. Buffum in a pensive mood and wondering with not a little interest how she would behave during George Upland's visit. His entry into her confidence would make the interest of this visit almost too poignant. But he did not regret his entry. Far from it. He regarded it as an honour gained, or rather perhaps as an honour bestowed upon him.

He stood up and kicked the log on the fire, scowling.

"Sentimental! Pooh! Enough to move the heart of a brass monkey."

The 'phone bell rang in the hall. He hurried down. Niece Lucia appeared, by the passage, her whole bearing even at that distance displaying eagerness, excitement, anxiety.

"Yes, George Upland speaking——"

"You want Lucia?" Mr. Buffum asked, and turning to her with: "It's George!" was met with frantic gestures of refusal.

"Oh no, don't bother her," the voice methodically proceeded. "I'm so sorry: I can't get away tomorrow. Not Friday. I shall be down on Saturday afternoon. I know you'll forgive me. Someone I must see on Friday evening. Nuisance. Yes. But it can't be helped. Please don't think me casual. Good-bye."

Mr. Buffum slowly hung up the receiver, blaming himself for being so feeble in an emergency. He had just woefully listened: had not pressed the young man to be less vague: had not urged him to come: had not even tried to make it Saturday morning. He said to Niece: "George has a business appointment. He can't get away till Saturday afternoon."

"Did he *say* it was a business appointment?" was instantly asked.

Mr. Buffum fumbled with his answer: "I . . . I gathered it was."

"Did he send any message to me?"

"Well, really, of course. It was all a message to you."

"Oh! I see."

"He seemed . . . he seemed very much upset," Mr. Buffum remarked, obliged rather to stretch a point.

Niece Lucia smiled, not very brightly. "That's all right, Old Man."

A sudden impulse forced from Mr. Buffum's lips the question: "Tell me. Does Marion know?"

"Brother and sister!" she said quite gaily. "We laugh over little brother's attractiveness. I'm supposed to be immune. It's a sort of stock joke. He won't believe he is attractive. Makes him quite angry. So we have to tease him about it. He adores Marion. We call him Don Juan. And then he swears he's scared to death of girls and women—with a few exceptions. And we rag him about the number of exceptions. Oh, he's a darling!"

She took Mr. Buffum's arm and walked him into the drawing-room.

"I was afraid he wasn't coming at all," she said, to explain away her hurt, for his benefit, he knew; and it was his turn to accept with: "Oh, I see."

But she pursued the matter. "Old Man, you mustn't be troubled about me, dear."

He was getting used to her quick changes of mood: she spoke now gently, and quietly sure of herself. "You mustn't think of me as a forlorn little lovesick soul. Oh no! Slopping over completely as I did just now has been an enormous relief. Made me see more clearly than ever how thrilling it is to care. . . ."

She drew her little body proudly up: "You need have no fears for me. I'm not ashamed to care—so much."

There was a quiver in her voice not of tears but of exaltation, to which Mr. Buffum responded.

No other little breakdown occurred: no listlessness: no sign of the lovesick maiden: indeed no reference at all was made to George or his coming until they were drinking coffee after lunch on Saturday, when Lucia said: "Sorry, Old Man, but a solitary walk is indicated. A bit restless. And any incipient hysteria must be nipped in the bud. Don't you think!"

And off she resolutely set.

All men (even those in a staid avuncular or paternal position) undergo some difficulty in comprehending what a girl, dear to them, can possibly find attractive in another man. Mr. Buffum thought George Upland a pleasant fellow: but well . . . all this feeling seemed a little excessive perhaps when directed to one who was after all quite an ordinary young man. And really, a very stupid young man if he were not aware of his amazing luck in being loved by a girl like Lucia.

To try and see him with her eyes would be interesting. And even if he could not quite manage that imaginative *tour de force*, he would be watching a poignant little comedy: not too poignant, he hoped, for his power of control.

He got up, on his way to meditate peacefully in the study, when Eliza opened the door and quietly announced:

"Mr. Upland."

And the young man himself strode into the room, rather taking Mr. Buffum's breath away by the unexpectedness of his arrival. He trusted that his welcome was adequate. He mentioned that Lucia, not expecting him till tea, had gone out for a walk alone. But George seemed restless and perturbed.

"Gone out for a walk alone!" at length he repeated with annoyance in his voice. "What's the sense of that? That's like a girl. Which way's she gone?"

"She didn't say, I'm afraid."

"There you are. Can't even leave a message simple as that. Girls are like that. Want to make you feel in the wrong. Why can't they be easy and sensible, same as a chap?"

"Perhaps because they're not—chaps," Mr. Buffum threw out. "Only just girls."

It didn't sound really sympathetic, though he wanted to be sympathetic.

"You never *do* know *where* you are," George angrily said. Then, feeling the unfairness, no doubt, of working his anger off on Mr. Buffum, he added: "Anyhow, I'm awfully sorry—only it is riling, isn't it?"

Mr. Buffum always knew that two sides existed to every question, but never before had he seen both sides simultaneously with such distinctness. It made any response too difficult for him. He smiled vaguely and murmured a non-committal: "I suppose so." Then brightened to remember that though George Upland might be unsatisfactory as a lover he was an indubitable expert with a Planet car, and there could be no harm in diverting attention from the difficult ground of human emotion to the safer mechanical ground of an internal combustion engine, as his own Planet was behaving in a way that was not intelligible to either Monnie or himself.

Accordingly he made the suggestion that they might perhaps have a look at the car, and the suggestion was eagerly accepted. They went out to the garage. Monnie, of course, appeared from nowhere, and voiced the cause of anxiety.

No hint, now, Mr. Buffum was amused to notice, of any wish to cut the knot, as in the more human difficulty, by getting cross and asking why the car was not a bicycle, as George a few minutes earlier had got cross and asked why Lucia could not be like a chap. Not a bit of it. All was keenness, as though the difficulty were a challenge to intelligence. "It's a question of the most delicate adjustment," George looked up from unscrewing a valve to declare with happy face, and went on:

"Motor cars as a whole: then the particular make

of car: then" (and his voice became enthusiastic) "the individual car of that particular make. It's uncanny how each car has its own character. All of which would sound mere rubbish to an ass not sensitive to the delicacies of a car!"

He spoke with genuine bitterness. It hurt him to see a good car not appreciated and mishandled: taken for granted as a mere means of getting about.

"And human beings are even better worth understanding than cars," thought Mr. Buffum, and became absorbed in brooding thought as to what would happen if the same alert awareness were brought to bear on the delicacies of human nature as was being brought to bear on his Planet, while he watched and listened with his ears and eyes.

Their interest quickened, time flew.

Lucia returned from her walk, and saw them gazing under the Planet. Not being a chap, she did not join them with a casual *Hullo!* and gaze too. She thought that she would rather not appear, just hot and dirty, dishevelled and tweedy from her walk. They seemed quite happy. She went in to have a bath and change; with a distinct little pang at not being noticed (though she did everything possible to escape notice) and a distinct gleam of delight at having George there and at the prospect of meeting him at tea—looking her very best.

She had hardly turned on the bath water when the job with the car was brought to a happy termination, and immediately George asked: "Wherever's Lucia?" To which Mr. Buffum, hearing her steps in the house and water running, answered: "I think she's having a bath after her walk."

George hooted; and said furiously:

"Sick as mud, you'll see: because we didn't hang about doing nothing till she *did* come back."

"Oh no!" Mr. Buffum feebly expostulated, disliking the possible touch of truth in the taunt.

Mr. Buffum left him to wash and change his boots. They met five minutes later in the drawing-room—alone again—to smoke a cigarette and wait. A quarter-past four. Half-past four. Little was said. Eliza tapped and entered and said:

"Tea's ready, sir."

"We'll give her a minute or so, don't you think?" Mr. Buffum ventured to suggest.

"Oh, of course!" George snapped back.

The minutes passed. Long awkward minutes for Mr. Buffum—one of them—two of them—three of them—four of them——another cigarette? No. She'd surely be coming now. Five of them—six of them . . .

And she came. She came demurely delicious, gay, confident, bright-eyed, welcoming George with the ease of a sister, and there was no need at all for the men in their nice cloth suits to feel stuffy and masculine in contrast to her lightness and colour, nor for George, in particular, to feel that some feminine trick was being played upon him.

Why couldn't she have loafed in to tea in her walking clothes. He'd said: "Look here, do marry me! People'll be sure to talk after your nursing me those two nights, so let's be engaged now. Shall we?" She'd said: "Good gracious, no!" and ever since, for countless months now, she'd been different. She'd been playing some game with him. He'd not be able to stand it much longer. What was the great idea?

Had Mr. Buffum known of this proposal he would have been more puzzled than ever: but it was a little bit that had been kept from him—not so much from guile or deceitfulness, as that Lucia had given up the

effort to understand the fury such a proposal had roused in her; fury which bewildered her to think of —let alone express in words.

But she was all smiles and ease and graciousness as she escorted them to tea—a proper country tea, sitting up to the table in the dining-room, with bread and butter cut in slices, not in curled shavings; with scones and two huge cakes; cups, too, that were cups.

George set to work happily on bread and butter, which he spread with Marmite. Lucia poured out the tea. The party was so easy and laughing and agreeable that Mr. Buffum could hardly believe his memory, which reminded him of passionate undercurrents. Indeed, if the information had been received from any other quarter than the girl herself, he would not have believed it. He could have sworn, though, that she was aware of George's resentment at her absence. Be that as it may, her presence dispersed it as effortlessly as the sun disperses mist. He seemed quite obviously and quite happily reconciled to the fact that she was Lucia and not Lucius.

Mr. Buffum was inclined to smile indulgently at little difficulties which the dear girl had doubtless exaggerated. Leave them alone together, he thought with elderly complacence, and things will arrange themselves.

So he retired to his study to write letters after tea; and could hardly settle to his thriller; so convinced was he that all would be well, his mind kept wandering to plans for their future.

His surprise was, therefore, great, on joining them a little before dinner, to find a quiet game of Euchre proceeding, a game which he knew Niece Lucia rather disliked.

"Playing Euchre!" he was obliged to ejaculate.

"Yes: stupid little game, isn't it?" she brightly said.

"Well: you suggested it," George declared.

"Did I?" she asked gently, looking at him with a smile.

He flushed and threw down the cards.

"You jolly well know you did."

Mr. Buffum was caught napping.

"There is nothing wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong!" echoed Niece Lucia, prettily astonished.

"Wrong!" George echoed glumly. "Not more than usual. They can't be straight and simple. Why can't you say out you're furious with me for not coming last night and have done with it!"

"Furious with you!" she laughed. "But I'm not, you absurd person. We had the most delightful evening together, didn't we, Old Man?"

Mr. Buffum felt like a man who could not swim asked to jump in at the deep end. In these subtleties he was out of his simple depth.

"I er . . . well . . . yes," he faltered. He had certainly enjoyed having her confidence.

"My mistake, of course!" growled George. "But if you can't feel something in the air . . ."

"I must say . . ." began Mr. Buffum, deeply sympathizing with George, but caught Niece Lucia's eye and stopped. Then went hot all over to think how nearly he had let out: "Oh, kiss and be friends, you silly children!"

He sat silent, tugged in opposite directions. He had strong fellow feeling for a fellow-man: women *were* unaccountable beings. There was no getting away from it. Yet Niece's weeping confidence had established him in the very heart of the woman's camp, where he had never penetrated before. "As a buffer," he sadly thought, "I'm certainly not a success."

Niece's sole concern apparently—(kindness? To be mistress of the situation? To push the poor fellow deeper into the wrong?)—was to see that Uncle's guest no longer remained peeved. She got up, and stood beside him, ran light fingers through his thick hair, said: "I'm sorry, George dear. Really I am, if I've been annoying."

To which George answered, forced to smile: "I *can't* make you out!"

She gave his head an impulsive little hug to her body and laughed: "Oh! it's too simple! There's nothing to make out!"

And ran out of the room to get ready for dinner.

Alone with Mr. Buffum, George seemed to sink together into his chair, staring into the grate, which he at length addressed:

"Damn it! She's in love with that rotter . . ."

And Mr. Buffum, waiting alert for the name of the rotter which was not forthcoming, missed his chance of denying the soft impeachment: for George made an effort, pulled himself together, sat up and began to talk with intelligence and keenness upon the beauties of the Planet car, which were not mysterious to him.

At dinner again Niece played her part almost too perfectly, Mr. Buffum could not help thinking. She wore her prettiest frock, and behaved with such ease and gaiety that no one would believe a care or any unhappiness had ever crossed her life's horizon.

It was as though she had issued a little edict that there should be no crossness and was carrying her little edict into effect.

Mr. Buffum drifted happily along in the easy current until he was brought up with a bump against the fact. of which he was aware with a shock, that each was frightened of the feeling generated between them.

The boy surmounted his fear in his way: the girl in hers. His presence removed danger for her, gave her power.

Later on in the evening Mr. Buffum knew this quite without need of proof For when at a little before ten he got up and said he thought he'd turn in (with no definite plan now of leaving the young people together) there was no pretence at all about her, as she said: "I'm dead tired, too. I shall go, if you don't mind." All the virtue had gone quite out of her. A little tired child kissed each man "good night" and left them. Left George, too, at the top of resentment, hurt and bewildered and angry.

"There! You see!" he exploded.

But Mr. Buffum could not listen to him. He saw him to his room and left him without a word, except of ordinary courtesy.

At breakfast on Sunday Lucia was very quiet: passive, in fact; as though she were resigned to let things take any course they liked. George waited for her to take the lead, and waited in vain. Mr. Buffum did his best to fill in the gap; but George was hurt at the change in her, and showed it.

"What shall we do this morning?" he asked.

"Anything you like," Lucia answered, so that Mr. Buffum held the sausage-laden fork suspended in the air on the way to his mouth to look at her: so completely had she seemed at that moment to have given her secret away.

But George took the words at their face value, felt rebuffed. He shrugged his shoulders expressively: and went on eating his breakfast in silence.

Mr. Buffum noticed a look almost of pleading on Lucia's face. He was scared that she might break down. She had overplayed it last night. She *had*

overdone it. Now she was at the end of her tether. He began to talk volubly about the pleasures of a country life in the winter. The little comedy was getting a bit too poignant for him. Yet where could he pin any blame to the young man, except, of course, for existing at all?

The painful meal ended, Mr. Buffum went up to his study. He was putting a match to his fire when he heard angry voices rising from the hall. He hurried to the door but stopped in the doorway, listening. He heard, "Oh, all right then. The sooner I clear off the better."

He heard a stifled: "Don't go."

Stepped back hastily as George crashed upstairs, slammed the door of his room. Stood behind the half-closed door, literally trembling to know what he could say to stop the angry boy, and nothing came to him, nothing came to him.

The bedroom door was flung open; George clattered down the stairs with his packed bag, the front door slammed.

Still, Mr. Buffum stood in the doorway. There would be time to stop him before the car was started. Still nothing came to him. Still he stood like a man paralysed, till the noise of an angry departure—a furiously revved engine—reached his ears.

Then he walked back into his room, leaving the door half-open, and sat down, staring into the fire.

In a little while Niece came upstairs, slowly along the passage, slowly pushing open the door. She came in as though to walk required a difficult effort.

"He's gone!" she said.

Then she turned and hid her face in the cushions of the couch and cried as though her heart was breaking.

Mr. Buffum, on his knees beside her, a hand on her

shaking shoulder, said: "You mustn't cry, dear. You mustn't cry." After what seemed endless moments, she left off crying.

"It's all right," she said, cleaning up the traces of the storm. "I've got mine. I daresay he's quite right. I daresay I do want people in my power. I dunno. Anyhow, he's finished with it. Gone clean away. Just watched him go." (She gave a little laugh and repeated.) "Just watched him go. Wouldn't raise a finger to keep him. Couldn't. Couldn't."

She suddenly sat on the floor, leaning against Mr. Buffum's knees, unable to face him or anyone. He stroked her head, feeling horribly to blame. Surely he could have been more helpful. At any rate, no one could have been less helpful. At length he said: "Dear, I'm sure he cares far more than you realize."

"Oh no, no, no," came Lucia's whisper. "This is the end."

"I'm sure it's not!" said Mr. Buffum firmly.

"He doesn't want to care. He's afraid to care. I've done with him."

But Mr. Buffum's opinion did not change.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. BUFFUM STEADIES THE BUFFS

IT was Mr. Buffum's fifty-second birthday, but in spite of that he felt that in many private ways a man's life was becoming too elaborate. In his young days a man rolled his socks up and hoped for the best, or at any rate that enough attention would be paid to his face to permit his sock-arrangements to pass unnoticed. Nowadays no self-respecting man could appear in public without proper sock-suspenders, which were most tricky to adjust till you knew how. Niece Lucia had seen to the sock-suspenders. In the early days of their friendship she had taken him quietly on one side and very seriously but most awfully nicely (so as not to hurt his feelings) explained to him that he really must not let his socks hang in little heaps over his ankles: and had presented him with two pairs of sock-suspenders. To form a new habit, in the more intimate matters of dress, is almost more difficult than to break an old habit; but Mr. Buffum had accomplished this arduous feat to please the dear girl, tickled too and pleased that anybody should mind much, one way or the other, whether his socks bagged in rolls over his ankles or whether they didn't.

Collars were not what they were. Mr. Buffum found the two ordinary flaps to be fastened over the stud-head quite trying enough to manipulate, indeed too trying when his fingers were cold or he happened to be pressed for time. But that was nothing. That

was child's play to what the modern collar demanded. It was simply a new ritual. First the flaps had to be buttoned over the stud, then the right flap must be carefully lifted, a special tab from the left flap buttoned high up on a button hidden high up under the right flap: then the whole collar must be lifted and the tie adjusted and tied: then the collar must be lowered, the head of the stud removed and two more tabs buttoned over the stud (without letting either of the two already buttoned slip off); the head of the stud replaced; with the hanging tie increasing the difficulty; and if all these delicate operations were not carried out neatly and dexterously, the collar looked like a crumpled rag round your neck.

No: life had not become easier.

There was glib talk of Dress Reform for Men, as though the reforms that were already being enacted were not, in all conscience, sufficiently drastic. What privacy was left to be invaded, when one's most intimate garments were under public discussion?

There were occasions, it must be whispered, when Mr. Buffum almost wished that he had been left alone in the seclusion of country life with his old-fashioned night-gown and his old-fashioned razor, and without the countless advantages of modern life, the motor-car, the wireless, the gramophone, jazz, dancing and sock-suspenders.

So he a little wistfully thought, as he gazed at the contents of a neat parcel which the post had brought him on the fifth of May, his birthday; braces and sock-suspenders to match, of a chaste Cambridge blue. They were a present from Niece Lucia; they were also a refinement up to which he could never hope, really properly, to live. He might, of course, when lunching, as he sometimes did, at the Romeo, remove

his coat and waistcoat at the preliminary wash and brush up, and before putting them on again have his shoes cleaned : then if he gave his trousers an extra hitch, as he quite easily could, the shoe-black or an observant man or two might possibly notice that in the matter of braces and sock-suspenders he was the equal of any man living : a man, in truth, worthy to be the uncle of such a niece.

As a matter of fact he was lunching that very day at the Romeo with Niece—a birthday lunch, with possibly a show to follow. The least he could do was to put them on. That would be very little trouble. He immediately went and did so : solely to please Niece Lucia, and not at all, naturally, like a small boy with a new toy.

Ben, he noticed, was tidying a bed near the house. Ben, he was sure, would like to see. So with his coat and waistcoat over his arm he made for the garden. Eliza and Mrs. Ben were in the hall.

" What do you think of these ? " he asked, and, stooping, carefully worked up one trouser-leg ; then, slightly lifting his leg, he stood up, inserting proud thumbs under his braces.

Eliza and Mrs. Ben eyed the dainty harness with judicial seriousness. Mrs. Ben managed to say " *Very pretty* " before laughter took her comfortable body. Eliza said : " Did you ever now ! The things they do get up these days ! " To which Mr. Buffum made answer : " Yes. Wonderful. I'm just going to show old Ben how smart I am."

Whereupon the two women retreated to the kitchen to enjoy laughter without restraint, and Mr. Buffum hurried into the garden.

He was surprised, expecting gruff comment, to hear serious considered approval from Ben, who appraised

them as he might a well-planned bed: "Very nice: no mistake: very, very nice." Possibly in a past incarnation Monnie's father had been a dandy in the Regency or ruffled it in pearls and silk at the court of Queen Elizabeth. There was no knowing. Mr. Buffum was taken aback that no fun was poked at him, and Ben, sensing his surprise, remarked like a sage:

"If you are goin' to wear things, there ain't no sense in not havin' 'em so-so."

An early start forbade the possibility of probing more closely into the surprisingness of Ben's attitude. Mr. Buffum merely uttered a ruminative "Yes"; but he made a mental note that he would mention the matter to Niece Lucia at lunch, as it offered additional proof for his favourite idea that old Ben was a great gentleman disguised as a working man.

During the whole drive to London his mind brooded on the mysterious strands that, intricately woven from the past, go to the making of a human character, pleasantly aware as he brooded how the trivial absurdity of braces and sock-suspenders had lured him, like a will-o'-the-wisp, far out of his mental depth. He anticipated a delightful talk with Niece Lucia about this trait of Ben's: she had the intelligence to appreciate Ben.

But at lunch the poignant present disturbed all gentle speculation about anyone's past, even the admirable Ben's, for they had not been seated more than three minutes at their chosen side-table, in the corner farthest from the cheerful band, when Mr. Buffum noticed Lucia stiffen and start, redden and fumble with the menu, stoop to pick up something she had not dropped, then with elaborate unconcern open her bag and powder her face, which had just been carefully powdered.

"How nice," she said casually. "There's George over there having lunch with such a pretty woman!"

"Ah!" said Mr. Buffum.

"Look here, Old Man," Lucia declared emphatically. "If you think I'm just a jealous little beast you've got it twisted!"

He looked at her and smiled rather sadly.

"Must be upsetting, dear. I'd give anything to prevent your being upset."

"I'm not a tea cup at a party. Don't think it!"

"Do I?" He wrinkled his high forehead in question.

"Apt to: you know," she nodded.

There was silence.

"Your birthday lunch is not going to be a dud," she answered. "A bit of a shock. All right in a minute."

From the waiter, all smiling attention, Mr. Buffum ordered his favourite food, a lobster mayonnaise, and his favourite drink for such an occasion, a Moselle Cup—which a thin manager pressed forward to assure him should be mixed by himself precisely to his taste—*parfaitement*—a delicately pinched thumb and forefinger adding to the expressive assurance of eyes, voice and manner.

Alone again, Mr. Buffum leaned forward to murmur: "Wonderful fellow! After that, who could fail to find the Cup delicious?" And without waiting for a reply he placed his napkin on the table, pushed back his chair, and saying "One moment, dear," he left her, before his courage ebbed, to walk over to George's table.

George leaped to his feet at the sight of him, unaffectedly glad to see him.

"Mrs. Flamborough—Mr. Buffum."

Mr. Buffum bowed and said something courteous about a word with his young friend.

"I'm lunching with the cause of your rather hurried departure," he began, alluding to George's visit in January—their last meeting—when George had burst from the house in a fury. Mr. Buffum was uncertain whether George could have heard, for he retorted brightly: "Capital! How's the car going?" and turning to the very pretty Mrs. Flamborough said in the same bright voice, "He's got a Planet."

"Oh, have you?" Mrs. Flamborough cooed. "Now that is most interesting."

"Of course," said George, pushing his hands deep into his trousers pockets. "It's the finest car on the market at the price."

"Ah! but you are both such experts, I can see."

Mr. Buffum became most earnest. "Far from it, my dear lady. Far from it. No one could be more . . . more . . . shall I say, tentative with a motor-car than myself: very keen, very; but a duffer, a complete duffer, and it's never given any trouble even to me, a joy to drive, even though—" (he looked at George with smiling eyes) "even though my young friend here sold it to me. He's a horrid expert—abominable. Good-bye—we shall be having tea at the Leicester, from six onwards. Do come."

He turned away. His arm was clutched: a hoarse whisper almost burnt his ear in its intensity.

"It's a business lunch. Solely a business lunch. I swear."

"Of course," said Mr. Buffum. "I perfectly understand that."

And returned to his table, fully prepared to account for his daring. His luck was in. He arrived with the waiter, who proudly exhibited the lobster mayonnaise

for his scrutiny and approval before helping it from another table.

Mr. Buffum beamed to a firm-set Niece Lucia: "Looks good that, now doesn't it?" And he went on without a pause, "I've not seen that young man since his unceremonious departure in January." He did not take his eyes off Niece. "Can't allow any foolishness, you know, between me and my precious car's chief sponsor. That's business, you understand. Pure business. Essentially I am a business man. And the lady's a prospective buyer. I was able to help him with his deal. As a matter of fact, I thought very likely I might. Curious, but he seemed most anxious to impress upon me it was solely a business lunch. My ear still tickles with his whisper. There was no need to be so emphatic. It was obvious to anyone, quite obvious."

Niece put down her knife and fork.

"Old Man," she said with ominous quietness. "Now tell me. If you'd been here alone, would you have gone over and spoken to George Upland and a strange woman?"

"My dear, my dear!" laughed Mr. Buffum uneasily. "How can I possibly answer a question like that? Now—I ask you."

Niece did not relent: she persisted.

"I'll put it like this then. Have you ever in your life before left your table to speak to another man who was with a stranger to you?"

"Well, if it comes to that, it certainly has not been my habit to scamper about restaurants chatting with Tom, Dick and Harry . . ." and he surprised Lucia by returning look for look, and saying, as though his usual shyness had suddenly departed, "But I would do a lot more than that for you, young woman."

She managed to falter out :

" If you ever let on . . . what I told you . . ."

Almost angrily he broke in : " Ah, child, you can trust me ! "

He filled her glass with Moselle Cup and swerved recklessly from the emotional ditch.

" After the show I want to dance with you. Please. I hate a show just ending and just gloomily going away. Will you dance with me ? You must. My goodness ! How I can sympathize with the small boy who sat firmly on after the curtain fell on the last act, clung to his seat, insisted, ' I'm going to sit on here and see it all over again.' "

Lucia laughed : " You're in great form, Old Man."

" Of course I am," Mr. Buffum excused himself. " It's my birthday, hang it ! Who wouldn't be ? "

He wisely kept to himself his joy in her pluck and resilience, his pride in her resolve to be undefeated. No sidelong glance flickered towards George's table : there was no furtive inquiry. It really seemed while she talked of her job and her plans and the show and the good times they had enjoyed together that the little shock had quickened her wits and heightened her relish of the good cheer.

She looked radiant and nodded gaily in George's direction when they left the restaurant early, not wishing to lose a moment of the show : and taking Mr. Buffum's arm as they passed into the hall she said, not quite gaily but with no relapse into gloom, " I've not set eyes upon him since our small break in January."

Mr. Buffum immediately stopped for one foot's step and turned towards her—his whole face a question : which she answered by a fierce little series of nods and by saying : " Oh yes ! If anything more than ever ! "

She added, as they advanced again after the

moment's pause, with an odd laugh of her own, her very own, " Funny things, feelings, aren't they ? "

He squeezed her arm to his side with his elbow.

In the taxi Lucia became ribald at Uncle's expense, wondering how many gentle quiet women bore his image within their hearts as that of the only man they could ever have loved. He assured her there were none—none at all. But how could *he* know ? She *asked* him. Nothing really wrought such permanent havoc as the sort of shy tenderness and worship which emanated from his presence like scent from meadow-sweet. No mere man could fathom the secret sorrow of a woman's lot. Heavens ! how it hurt to be a woman. She rolled it all up in a ball and tossed it about ; her mind, bravely wantoning with its own distress, allowed laughter of quality full play.

Laughter of quantity, copious shattering laughter, was offered by the rich absurdities of the show, in which Mr. Buffum for the first time in his life found the ancient fun of a drunk-scene really funny. The show was in two acts : the first act had been so uproariously amusing that he feared he must surely have laughed himself out—tickled to the death of all his laughter, but he was reckoning without Mr. Hooley and Mr. Howard, who instantly started him off again and to such effect that, weak and prostrate, he almost welcomed the lowering of the last curtain.

As he groped for his hat and stick, he murmured to Niece Lucia : " You have such an infectious laugh, my dear."

The remark, sounding like an excuse, set her off laughing again : " Oh, I like that ! " she stammered, and people near her began to laugh too.

" There, you see," said Mr. Buffum, amply corroborated.

She kept laughing on and off, all the slow way out and along the crowded streets, and Mr. Buffum had no difficulty whatever in steering her casually into the Leicester for tea.

" Oh yes, of course," she said, as they went in, " and you want to dance now, do you, you insatiable old man ! "

" I most certainly do."

" Blackbird, what a boy you are ! How you do go it ! " Lucia aptly quoted from the works of Mr. Brown ; but her Uncle muddled the words with the name of a fox-trot song and hoped vainly that his old favourite *Bye-bye, Blackbird* might be the first tune played.

" That," he said, solemnly reminiscent, " was the first tune I ever danced to in public."

" Yes. Yes. Your breakaway," she assented sadly. " The first step on the downward path."

" I shall never forget that supper at the Savoy." He continued no less solemnly, quite undeterred, " What it has led to ! "

" What indeed ! " She raised her brows in mock dismay.

They sat down at a table.

Mr. Buffum leaned forward and pressed her arm.

" Your friendship," he said, giving the words their full meaning.

And for once Lucia took it quietly in and gave it him quietly back. " You old darling ! " she gently said.

At which Mr. Buffum, caught unawares, blurted out his happy secret : " I mentioned to George we should be coming here : and suggested he might look in."

Consternation took him at her reception of it. She paled, and on a breathless little gasp articulated, " Oh, my dear, I wish you hadn't ! "

Whereupon Mr. Buffum felt that he had laid rough hands on what was, quite beyond his comprehension, delicate.

"Forgive me for a clumsy rogue," he said. "But here he comes!"

He had been so confident that she would carry it gaily off, take it in her gallant stride, that he was horrified to see her flush deeply on greeting George and then become pale again, sitting still, little and lifeless. He could not believe his eyes. She seemed to shrink. Her face to grow pinched and smaller. A strange intensity came over her, even as she dwindled. The poor child must be feeling faint. . . .

And the young man was exuberant. And he was all attention to Mr. Buffum: the idiot noticed nothing.

"I say, you know, after my foul rudeness. Barging off like that. It is too decent of you." (He stopped.) "Hurried a bit. Breathless. You know. Emō-sh, too, perhaps." (He laughed.) "But it is too decent to ask me to join you two."

Mr. Buffum caught the waiter's eye.

"Another tea, please."

"Tea-cake, not toast. Tea-cake, mind, not toast," George called out.

Apparently the idiot could not even look at Lucia, still less speak to her.

The band started *I Like Your Funny Face.*

"You've practically finished tea, haven't you?" he said to Mr. Buffum. "Do you mind if I have one dance, now—then you dance while I have my tea. What?"

Mr. Buffum smiled. George jumped up, with a bright "Come on!"

Lucia silently rose at once.

Mr. Buffum leaned hurriedly forward: "Yes, dear, but if . . ." he began.

Her hand on George's shoulder, she gave him a pitiful smile. They moved off. He watched them make their gliding circuit of the floor. Was she happy? Could she bear it? Funny things, feelings, he remembered her saying. They were approaching the table. She broke away and sat down. "Not quite myself. So sorry. Sort of giddy."

George stood with his hand on the table, looking down on her. His hand was trembling. With rage at her abrupt leaving of him? With concern for her health? Mr. Buffum wondered.

"That is a pity, isn't it?" said George, sitting down and busying himself with his tea.

A negro with the band vociferated the words of the new tune the band began to play: *Anyone can see with half an eye that I'm crazy over you.* It gave Lucia, leaning rather feebly back in her chair, a crude dig in the ribs. She looked up, caught Uncle's eye of deep concern, and shook with silent laughter, feeble as she was. Then slowly straightened up as though laughing had refreshed her.

"Yes!" rasped George, eyeing her resentfully over his teacup. "Very funny, isn't it?"

She smiled at him. "I found it so. That's why I laughed."

He leaned across the table, scowling. "Heartless. Maddening . . ." he began, then forced control, pushed himself back. "Laugh away. Why shouldn't you? Sorry."

She started forward. A little choked voice said: "Don't be silly!" She started back, erect again. George glared at her.

"I am silly." His words would have been more

effective if his mouth had not been full of tea-cake. Lucia bit her lips not to laugh, partly only at the ludicrousness of it. At length she said:

"He's a bear, Old Man. Let's dance. I'm sound, now, as a nail."

Mr. Buffum took no notice.

"Did you pull it off?" he asked. "Did you sell the lady the car?"

"Oh yes, I sold it all right. Thanks very much." Casualness turned to intense bitterness as he added: "I can do that sort of thing: it's only when it comes to things that matter that I'm a hopeless failure."

"George dear!" expostulated Lucia, rising. "Whatever can matter more than business? I am afraid you're not quite your bright self this afternoon." She looked straight at him. "I was upset at seeing you again after such a long absence. That was all that was wrong with me. I have such a tender heart, you know."

She gave her own little laugh and pinched the lobe of his ear.

"Come along, Old Man."

They moved off.

"I think you tease him too much," Mr. Buffum was obliged to confide in her ear.

Her touch on him tightened. "Oh dear," she said. "I must do something. What right has he now to make me feel all goopy?"

"That's not his fault."

"Nor's teasing him my fault. Really it's not."

She nestled up to him and danced on in silence, till a little shiver of laughter ran over her and she said: "He ought to live in Lamb's island where the little pigs run about roasted, crying 'Eat me!'"

Mr. Buffum could only retort, "You mustn't be exacting."

Again came the pressure of her hand on him. "Little boys must learn not to sit under the cherry-tree with their mouths open hoping that a nice ripe cherry will drop into them."

They were nearing their table.

"Finish it with him now. Just to please me."

"Certainly not!"

They passed a disconsolate George.

"His hair gets rough when he's cross. Always."

Something in his partner's voice caused Mr. Buffum to look down into her face. Her eyes were swimming in tears, shining. She looked up into his face. "Oh! I am loving this dance." she whispered. "I shall never forget it." Another shiver passed over her body, not of laughter. She said very slowly, "I don't think . . . it's only cross . . . I shall be making him . . . now, I mean." And a little later, "Old Man, I know. I know. I am so happy."

In a little while the dance stopped and they returned to their table. His tea, no doubt, had had a soothing effect upon George. He was less ruffled and disconsolate. He began at once to apologize.

"Sorry. You're right. I was a bear. Horrible. I'm not usually. Honestly I'm not. There's something about you. I dunno. There's no earthly reason why you should care tuppence about me."

"Fourpence, George. Fourpence three farthings."

"Shut up! But your maddening composure. I dunno. Teasing me so easily. So beastly sure of yourself. I'm blest if I haven't taken to dreaming about you. Now laugh. It does me good to be laughed at by you. Only look here. Don't just drop out, do you mind, not again. All this time since

January. You're too good a *friend*. Honestly I won't . . . I mean . . . play the cad, lose my temper, act the unmitigated ass, like I did."

No answer came from Lucia. No look in his direction. Mr. Buffum out of the corner of his eye noticed the dwindling process. George, receiving no answer, turned to him: "You understand, sir. I know you understand. Don't you think she might?"

"Well here, with so many people about . . . I mean." Mr. Buffum racked his brains. George, misunderstanding, became instantly contrite.

"Oh, I *am* sorry. Have I been shouting?"

"Not at all. Not at all. I meant . . ." One of his rare inspirations came to Mr. Buffum. "I'm staying at Lucia's flat" (she looked sharply up) "this evening. I so like these sort of talks. Why shouldn't we spend the evening together? Dine together, you know, quietly, and have a nice long talk about . . . about . . . friendliness. I should like it immensely, and it's my birthday, so Lucia's got to do as I like."

The young man's eyes shone. He held his breath, waiting for Lucia to speak. She suddenly looked up, startling Mr. Buffum.

"Oh, all right. All right. I'm game!" she said in a quick odd voice.

"Are you sure it's all right?" George asked earnestly.

"I was thinking of work perhaps that ought to be done. But it can wait. It can wait."

"Oh, good!" said George, turning a beaming face first to one and then to the other. "Good. We're all friendly and nice again. I am glad. I am glad. That makes all the difference, sir. It is good of you. But we're not going just yet, are we? One more dance or—two. What?"

He looked shyly at Mr. Buffum, and half rose. Lucia put a hand on his arm, and said softly and seriously : " I'm sorry, but I can't dance with you this evening, George dear."

Mr. Buffum heard the most delicate possible emphasis laid on the word *dance*, with the most delicious implications to one less obtuse than circumstance made poor George at the moment. He looked downcast and puzzled. Mr. Buffum, savouring the delightful implication, came to his rescue with a glib ease that surprised his ear to hear, carrying on the pleasant undercurrent of meaning :

" She can only dance with me to-night. Pledged to me for dancing. You see it's my birthday," and he added, poking gentle fun at George, " I know *you'll* understand."

George didn't. He looked a bit baffled, but he brightened to asseverate, " Yes. Rather."

Mr. Buffum leaned across and said behind his hand, with twinkling eyes, " She gave me braces and sock-suspenders to match. Of a beautiful light blue. She must needs furbish up old Uncle. We're none of us safe, you know."

That put the finishing touch to George's recovery. He laughed happily all over himself and remained happy, while Mr. Buffum moved off with Lucia in the dance.

" You darling," she murmured. " You darling."

" Is it me you're meaning ? " he dared to inquire.

Her hand beat his shoulder in reproving taps.

" Too delicious ! " she murmured on. " Spinning it out. Squeezing out the last little drop of secret delight."

" To be so brought into it." Mr. Buffum murmured back, " Bless you ! "

"You've no things for the night. Have you? Nothing."

"Doesn't matter! If I sat up all night for once. What would it matter?"

She began to shake with laughter.

"You shall wear my silkiest nightie."

Yet under her laughter he felt it was somehow a new Niece he was dancing with: tenderer, he swore to himself, and even dearer: In flower; so proud he was to be thus admitted to her love—into the midst of its warmth and light and quivering joy.

"We'll go straight back to the flat," he said. "Don't you think!"

Her hand's glad pressure showed assent.

"And sup, perhaps, lateish."

Her glowing face looked up at him. She whispered: "You are perfect."

Mr. Buffum was aware that she drew no veils over herself as she sat happily down by George. She seemed at peace, quite open and quite still. The strain had passed from George's face. All three sat content and silent, until the young man felt he must give his reason for the quietness and said in a gentle voice: "I missed you so. I'm so happy to be with you, again."

Lucia said: "One more dance with you, Old Man, and then we'll go. I want a waltz." She closed her eyes. "The dreamiest of the dreamy."

Their luck was in. It was a waltz. *A Shady Tree.* An ancient favourite. After which they drove to Lucia's flat, a compact arrangement of small high rooms at the top of an enormous house in Queen's Gate. She showed George into the sitting-room.

"I'll be with you in a moment," she said. "I must just see to Uncle."

"A little rest is exactly what I want," said Mr.

Buffum in the minute bedroom, meant for a maid, used for a spare-room. He removed his shoes, lay on the bed ; she made him comfy with a book. Evening light glowed through the window. She kissed him and left him without a word : to return in a few minutes, in a little frock of soft flimsy stuff he had never before seen. She walked swiftly up to him and wrapped her arms closely round his neck.

" Dear girl," said Mr. Buffum. " How lovely of you !"

" I am going to him, now. He won't be cross, do you think ? " she whispered and gave the gentlest little laugh.

Then swiftly she was gone.

Mr. Buffum, alone, did not attempt to read. He lay brooding, in that strange deep place of consciousness where joy and sorrow meet so closely as to be almost indistinguishable. The light faded as he lay brooding. He lost all sense of time. Perhaps he slept. " May their appreciation of each other grow," was one thought or prayer that emerged. " May I remain sensitive to the joy of others, responsive to the grief of others, and so keep young," was another.

The door opened. Lucia's voice said : " Come into the sitting-room, dear."

He tidied up a little and went.

She was standing very still by the mantelpiece, the same, yet not the same. Her small head was a little bent. She did not look up. A soft radiance seemed to come from her whole slight body as she stood, and when she slowly raised her head and smiled, shone out from her whole small face.

" George gone ? " he asked.

She nodded. The corners of her mouth kept quivering.

" An elfin creature, scarcely human," Mr. Buffum

suddenly thought, striving to record the difference in her. "Or else for once divinely human," his mind leaped to add.

She closed her eyes and clenched her fingers and said in a quick little voice: "I feel kissed all over. Still."

Then she relaxed and sat down, leaning forward, her hands touching her cheeks, not to let another's touch escape.

"I must tell you," she said. "I said nothing. I couldn't speak. Just listened. He talked. Couldn't ask a girl to marry him until he had a thousand a year. That sort of thing. Oh, on and on! Rot! I mean . . . In a way. Anyhow, at last he did stop. I just sat. Then suddenly he put his head in my lap and began to cry."

There was a long pause. Came very quickly: "So did I," followed by a catch in her breath. She got up as though to shake herself free of it. "Then he began to kiss me. Went on." She looked up, bewilderment on her face, bewildered still even at the thought of it. "Like one long wonderful kiss. Drowning . . . No. Soaring. That's all."

She hid her face in her hands.

"What's the time?" she started up to ask.

"Just after ten."

"Three hours," she said, astonished.

"Supper?" he asked.

"Yes. I'll slip on a cloak and come."

But she ran back from the door and put her hands on Mr. Buffum's shoulders. "I couldn't have spoilt it, now could I? with talk of arrangements, and life and the future?"

"There'll be plenty of time for that, I think," Mr. Buffum answered, smiling.

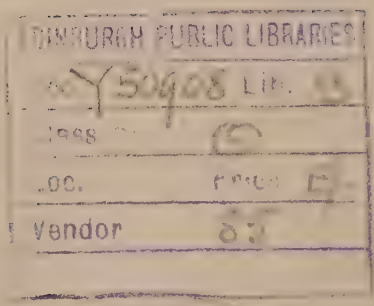
She turned again at the door to say quickly:

"On your birthday too. Are you glad?"

"Yes, dear," said Mr. Buffum. "Very glad indeed."

And for all the hopes and fears a man must have for the future of one so dear, he fully meant it, fully——as he regarded her present radiance.

THE END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